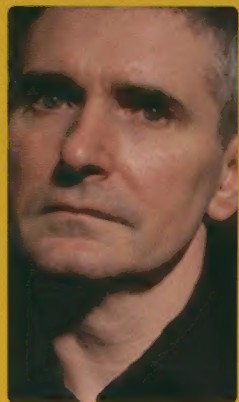


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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY ♦ ISSUE 215 ♦ APR 2008 ♦ £3.75



**MIKE CAREY**  
INTERVIEWED



**THE ENDLING**  
JAMIE BARRAS



**CRYSTAL NIGHTS**  
GREG EGAN



**STREET HERO**  
WILL MCINTOSH



**HOLDING PATTERN**  
JOY MARCHAND



**DRAGONFLY  
SUMMER**  
PATRICK SAMPHIRE



**IMITATION GAME**  
RUDY RUCKER



**ORIGINAL ART**  
DARREN WINTER  
CHRIS NURSE  
WARWICK FRASER-  
COOMBE



**NEWS & REVIEWS**  
ANSIBLE LINK  
BOOKS  
FILMS & DVDS



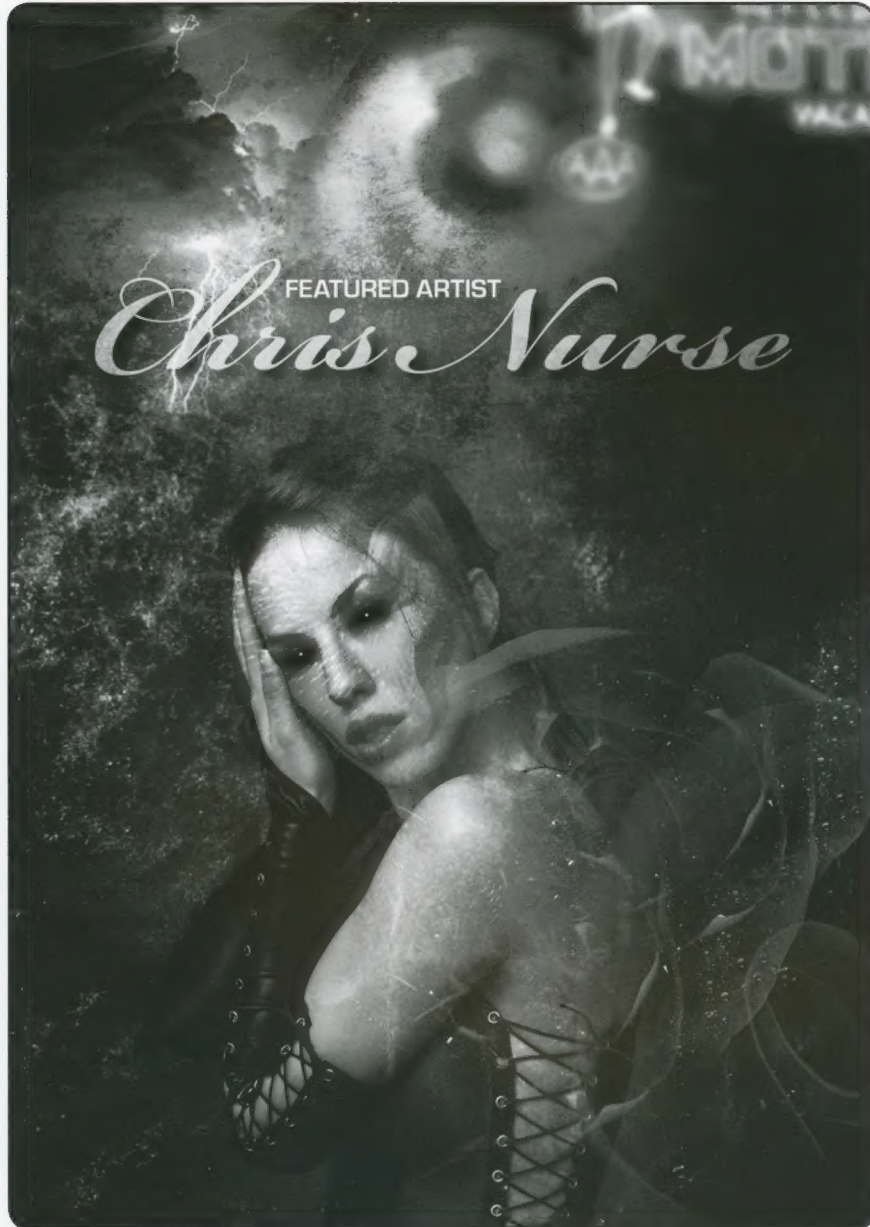
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# NEXT ISSUE • IZ216

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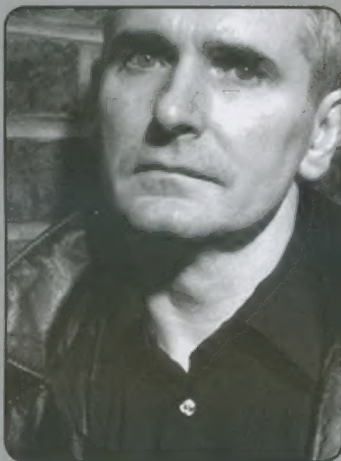
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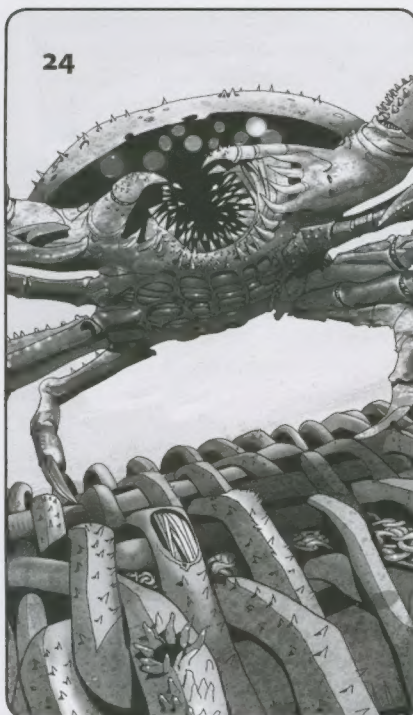
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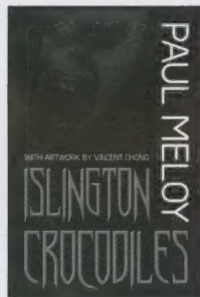
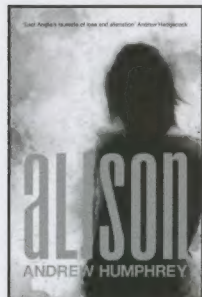
## INTERACTION

ONLINE FORUM  
FEEDBACK & DISCUSSION  
TTAPRESS.COM/FORUM



TTA has only published four books (excluding *Crimewave*) – the best-of-TTA anthology *Last Rites and Resurrections* (long out of print); Ray Naylor's *American Graveyards*; Mat Coward's hilarious, essential writers' guide *Success...And How To Avoid It; The Planet Suite*, which you can now buy for next to nothing – but we'd like to publish more from now on, and more regularly. Many titles will undoubtedly be connected to the magazines in some way – story collections, novellas and novels from popular contributors, for example.

Connected not to *Interzone* but inextricably with *Black Static* and *Crimewave* is Andrew Humphrey, and it's with him that we begin this hopefully moderately successful venture. *Alison*, his debut novel, is out now. He fills it to the brim with 'Norwich Noir' – dark secrets coming to light, loss and alienation – and in the process creates a riveting mystery. Cover art is by *Black Static*'s David Gentry.



Next up is Paul Meloy's collection *Islington Crocodiles*. The title story appeared here in *Interzone*, and the book includes other favourites such as 'Black Static' and 'Dying in the Arms of Jean Harlow', as well as the stunning new, unpublished 'The Vague'. The hardback edition will contain several colour plates of the illustrations Vincent Chong produced for some of the stories.

More details elsewhere in this issue, and you can buy *Alison* and pre-order *Islington Crocodiles* using the magazine's insert. You might also want to tell us on the forum what books you'd like us to publish in future, which *Interzone* authors you'd like to see a collection from, and so on.

This issue we welcome back Greg Egan. Coincidentally Gollancz have just reissued Greg's six novels and two story collections, and are publishing his next novel, *Incandescence*, in May. Look for a special offer from Gollancz next issue, exclusively for *Interzone* readers!

**J.G. Ballard** revealed that, as insiders knew, he'd been diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer in mid-2006. This spurred him to write his autobiography, *Miracles of Life* – published in February.

**You Read It Here Last.** Tolkien's estate is suing New Line Cinema over the *Lord of the Rings* films. Supposedly the estate should receive 7.5% of the estimated \$6 billion gross receipts but, beyond a modest upfront payment of \$62,500, has had nothing.

**As Others See Us.** Mark Harris on sf cinema: 'Sci-fi is in trouble, although it's not the kind of trouble that can be measured at the box office, where it looks as healthy and robust as a T-rex must have seemed five minutes before it realized there was nothing left to eat. The genre has been around for as long as the movies themselves, and flourished for the last 30 years. The problem is, none of the ideas are getting any newer. Scratch that: the problem is, there are no ideas.' (*Entertainment Weekly*)

**Cory Doctorow** announced the birth on 3 February of a daughter proudly named... Poesy Emmeline Fibonacci Nautilus Taylor Doctorow.

**Dumbwatch.** Booksthatmakeyoudumb. virgil.gr compares the most popular reading at 1,352 US colleges (as revealed by that scientific tool, Facebook) with average SAT/ACT scores, to chart a 'correlation between books and dumbitude.' From the *Boston Globe* coverage: 'Science fiction, for some reason, appears at both ends of the chart: Near the top [scores], we find Ayn Rand's pro-capitalism dystopia *Atlas Shrugged*, Kurt Vonnegut's apocalyptic novel *Cat's Cradle*, and Orson Scott Card's uber-geeky *Enders Game*, about a kid whose mad video-game skills allow him to save the planet from real space invaders. Near the bottom, we find Ray Bradbury's apocalyptic dystopia *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury's book is a classic work of fiction, never mind the genre; *Enders Game* is drivel. So...what does it all mean?'

**Terry Pratchett** announced: 'I have been diagnosed with a very rare form of early onset Alzheimer's...' He's cautiously optimistic but was unready for the response: 'Not unpleasant, but kind of odd, like being a guest at one's own wake. We

couldn't ring out on the phones and the mail boxes just went crazy...there were around 40,000 contacts all told.'

**Conspiracy Corner.** Boris Johnson proposed the best explanation to date of the 'mystery' surrounding Princess Diana's death: 'I will reveal how the Duke of Edinburgh secretly trained the Loch Ness Monster to swim up the Seine until it reached the Pont d'Alma and then I will explain how Philip then gave a kind of ghillie's whistle and Nessie reared out of the water and so startled Henri Paul that he swerved into the path of Elvis Presley in the white Fiat Uno, at which point Prince Charles – hovering overhead in a Luftwaffe helicopter – switched on the supermagnet installed by MI6 in the concrete pillar of the tunnel and sucked the Merc to its doom.' (*Telegraph*)

**Ardath Mayhar** is this year's SFWA Author Emeritus.

**Publishers and Sinners.** *Dedalus Books*, publishers of important translated work including much fantasy, lost its modest Arts Council funding in January and may well close. The AC has behaved oddly, failing to follow its own 'disinvestment' procedure by giving proper notice of and reasons for the decision. • *Farthing* magazine is on hold since issue 5, owing to editor Wendy Bradley's poor health and lack of funds.

**Brandon Sanderson**, US fantasy novelist, was chosen to complete the late Robert Jordan's *A Memory of Light*, final novel in the stupefyingly popular 'Wheel of Time' series.

**Douglas Adams** inspired a US fan campaign to rename 42nd Avenue in Portland, Oregon, as Douglas Adams Boulevard.

**Harlan Ellison's** wrath – at rumours that the latest *Star Trek* film will use characters he invented for 'City at the Edge of Forever' – was misplaced. He's been reassured that the story is false. From our correspondent Una Tribble: 'My sources tell me the Guardian of Forever prop seen on the Paramount lot is not in fact for the new film but the new *Star Trek* tour that's recently been press-released over on Startrek.com.'

**THOG'S MASTERCLASS**  
**Philosophy Dept.** 'If the shortest distance between point A and point B is a straight



line, how do you go from point A to point B? This sort of debate could take a long time.' (Colin Kapp, *Transfinite Man* aka *The Dark Mind*, 1964) • **Worsening Odds Dept.** 'Outspace there was one chance in infinity squared that he would not die.' *But later:* "I don't give you one chance of survival in infinity raised to the infinite power," said Madden.' (*Ibid*)

**Dept of As Others See SF.** 'The sun didn't want to go down that day because it was a sci-fi sun, big and fat and red, and it wanted only to dry out everything in creation.' (T. Coraghessan Boyle, 'Ash Monday', *New Yorker*, 2008)

**Psychosomatic Dept.** 'Sometimes, when he slept, he would awaken screaming and with the feeling of evil scraping at his mind like a cold lump of conviction resting heavily in his stomach.' (Lee Harding, 'Dragonfly', *New Worlds*, 1962)

#### R.I.P.

**Roger Eldridge** (1944–2007), UK author and photo-journalist whose sf novels were *The Shadow of the Gloom-World* (1977) and *The Fishers of Darksea* (1982), died on 4 November. He was 63. • **Frank Hamilton** (1918–2008), US artist who worked in a pulp mode – recreating classic *Doc Savage* and *Shadow* magazine covers as well as original art – died on 28 January; he was 89. He co-authored *Amazing Pulp Heroes* (1988) with Link Hullar. • **Edward D.**

**Hoch** (1930–2008), US author of over 900 stories since his 1955 debut, died on 17 January; he was 77. He's best known for crime fiction, which earned him the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master award. His early 'Simon Ark' detections are tinged with fantasy; he also wrote horror and sf, including three 1970s sf/detective novels. • **Maila Nurmi** (1921–2008), Finnish-born actress who as 'Vampira' was the first ever TV horror host (*The Vampira Show*, 1954) and famously appeared in Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), died on 10 January aged 86. • **Derek Pickles** (1928–2008), UK fan whose *Phantasmagoria* (1950–1955) was a notable fanzine of its day, died on 5 January at age 79. Derek was at Britain's first post-war convention in 1948 and renewed his fan contacts in the 1990s. *Phantasmagoria* contained John Brunner's first published works (verse). • **Marion Van Der Voort**, who with her husband Richard ran the well-known UK sf bookshop At The Sign of the Dragon for 35 years, died on 26 December following a long bout of pneumonia.

Chasing the exclusive that will make his name, Edwin Norris is plunged into the grotesque world of a centuries-old, city-sized penitentiary.



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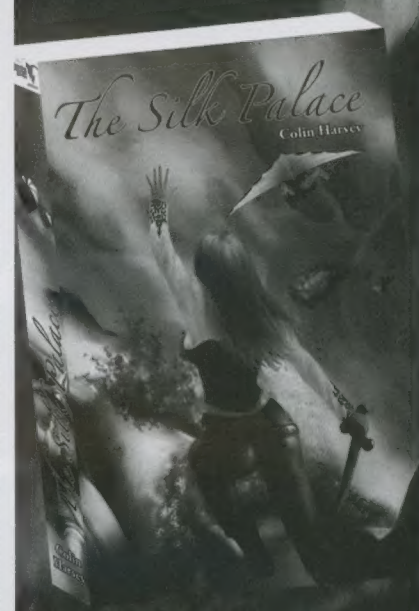
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# The Silk Palace

COLIN HARVEY

BY THE AUTHOR  
OF LIGHTNING  
DAYS



"In *The Silk Palace* Colin Harvey fashions a richly textured magical kingdom that is ripe with sensuality and filled with both wonder and horror."

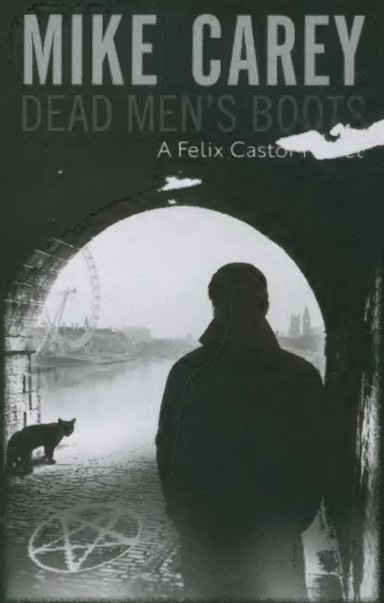
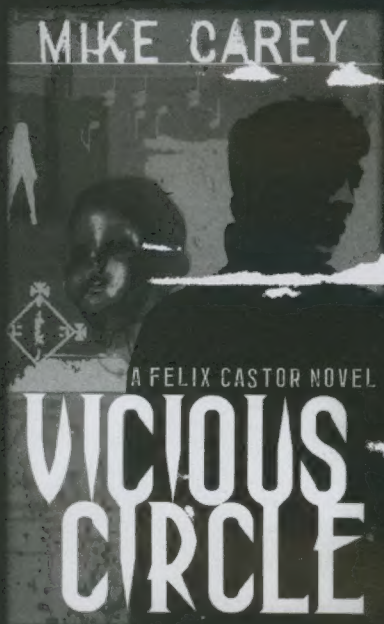
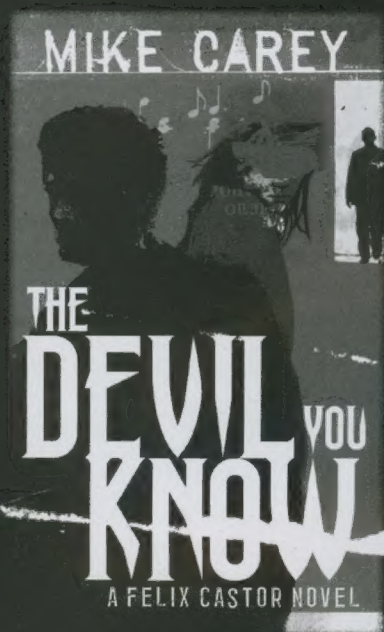
— Bruce Boston, author of *The Gardener's Tale*

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# REVELATIONS



THE FELIX CASTOR NOVELS ARE PUBLISHED BY ORBIT



# AND POSSIBILITIES

Andrew Hedgecock talks to Mike Carey about animism, vertical freedom and the end of all things

For me Mike Carey is author of the Felix Castor series: tales of a freelance exorcist adrift in a world in which reality is shifting while ghosts, were-beings and demons invade the quotidian world. The Castor books (*The Devil You Know*, 2006; *Vicious Circle*, 2006; *Dead Men's Boots*, 2007) combine bleakly witty and laconic prose, a visionary exposé of the way we live now and relentlessly gripping narrative mired in wonder and terror. For others Carey is one of the best comic book storytellers around – a writer who has contributed to contemporary myths and story cycles such as *Hellblazer*, the *Sandman* spinoff *Lucifer*, *X-Men*, *Fantastic Four*, *Elektra* and *Red Sonja*.

Mike Carey grew up in Liverpool in the 1960s and, after reading English at Oxford University, worked as a teacher for 15 years. He settled in London, where he lives with his wife and three children. He has lived in the capital so long his north-western accent has all but been erased. You can, however, detect a faint trace in his soft but precise tones if you listen carefully enough. Carey's adopted city is a dominant character in the Castor books, so I begin our interview by asking whether he feels an outsider's perspective is useful in helping writers re-imagine urban landscapes.

"It makes you see a city in a different way, particularly one as big as London. The experience I had initially was that I saw the city as a series of unconnected islands, each with a tube station at the centre. Then I began to draw the connections, to see how King's Cross and Tottenham Court Road are connected, to see how the West End, the City and the East End bang into each other. It's a gradual process, and it's one that you're explicitly aware of. If you grow up in a city you absorb its geography at a very early age. So maybe moving here gave me a conscious awareness of structure that a native doesn't have."

But, I suggest, there's something stranger and more significant in his imaginative cartography of the city. Isn't there a sense in which emotion leaks into location, while location determines emotional response?

"Place is very important to me. I had to set *The Devil You Know* in London: the city wears its history very openly and you're constantly reminded it goes back a long way. I wanted to create strong links with the past in the Castor books, but in ways that are provocative and maybe not always expected. Having Castor go to the Dissenter's Cemetery was an example of that, and so is the way the East End is used in the books.

"It's hard to imagine doing the same thing with another English city. Place does bear on event, and it will to an even greater extent in the next book: I can't say much more about that at the moment, but much

of it is set in an estate loosely based on the Aylesbury Estate in South East London – the city in the sky. It's a very disturbing place, suffering from concrete fatigue and damp. A setting like that must condition the way you approach a story. It becomes a stage on which only certain dramas can be played.

"This is all to do with emotion and relationship. I'm aiming to create a sense of the ending of days in the Castor books. A sense that something apocalyptic is about to happen – a sense that human history is about to end or to be utterly transformed. And I think some of the backdrops I've used play well to this kind of millenarian or apocalyptic story."

I ask if Carey's fascination with eschatology is a symbolic reflection of the way he feels about the world and recent historical developments.

"Actually, it reflects the way I feel about the world in a very literal sense. I try not to talk about this because I have children, but I honestly believe the world our great grandkids will inherit is not going to be this one. The world-spanning civilisation we have created is about to end. Not by war, but just because we have created forces that feed back on us in destructive ways. And the human population of the Earth can't be sustained for more than another 150 years. Within a few generations civilisation will end and something new will take its place."

So does he see this cataclysm as an inevitable pay off for the way we live? An inevitable consequence of the dire and dysfunctional ways we organise ourselves, abuse the planet and consume its resources?

"Yes, and I felt it must inevitably come through in the worldview of the Castor books. It was never going to be an explicit theme, but it does colour the way Felix Castor – and maybe the reader – sees the world."

## The tipping point

I suggest fantasy and science fiction forms are well suited to tackling subject matter of this gravity and dealing with chaotic and unpredictable change. Writers of mainstream literary fiction seem reluctant, or unable, to tackle the very themes that are beginning to dominate public consciousness.

"In a mainstream novel you'd have to move the situation along twenty or thirty years – kind of like *Children of Men*, I guess? It's strange; I grew up believing in inevitable progress. I was a child of the sixties and there was a time I believed things just had to get better, that political systems had to refine themselves to something that was fairer and more openly democratic."

Carey's reflection elicits a temporary and utterly inappropriate sense of relief that my pessimism about



the sweep of history isn't merely a product of personal despondency and paranoia. A trouble shared being a trouble halved, as the cliché tells us. I ask Carey what the tipping point was for him: when did his optimistic worldview collapse?

"It started when the age of Thatcherism was replaced by a Labour Government that ceased to be socialist, then ceased to be left wing, and then ceased to be anything."

At that point we share reminiscences of the all too brief sense of elation we felt at the re-election of the Labour Party in 1997.

"I remember the euphoria of driving to school on the Friday morning after the 1997 election – I was a teacher in those days. We had stayed up as late as we could and I was listening to the last results coming in. It was a case of 'bliss was it in that dawn to be alive'. It felt like we were all waking up. Then it all went wrong."

"The Castor stories don't stem directly from that, but my preoccupations do spill over into the books. They are often compared to *Hellblazer*, which arose directly out of Thatcherism: Thatcher was just getting into her second term when Jamie Delano was writing the first issues. He used *Hellblazer* as a stalking horse to attack targets of police brutality, politicised use of the police in the 1980s, the decline of the inner cities – it's all in there."

I suggest part of the reason there was more scope for optimism in the 1980s was a wealth of radical art and writing that vigorously criticised the iniquities of the Thatcher Government. In the intervening decades, I suggest, there's been a tendency for the arts to eschew social and political critique. But Carey reminds me this trend isn't confined to the arts.

"There has been a tendency for most people to withdraw in that way. The Castor books reflect this post-political world. I don't want to make too much of it because I don't want the books to date by belonging too much to a particular historical era. But there is a lot of social commentary without any particular political conclusion or moral being drawn."

Carey tells me the fourth Castor book, *Thicker Than Water*, due for publication in October 2008, is set in London once again, but moves some of the action to Liverpool as it draws heavily on Castor's past.

"His relationship with his brother Matthew comes to the fore: someone they both knew as children has been horrifically attacked in South London. Castor is drawn into the investigation and it eventually leads him to go to Liverpool and talk to

people he knew before he left. We see his mother for the first time. And we get a bit more of a sense of what the Castor boys were like when they were kids and how their relationship soured. The Liverpool bit, like the Alabama sequence in *Dead Men's Boots*, takes up three or four chapters."

I remember reading somewhere that Carey intends to write six Castor books, and ask whether *Thicker Than Water* moved the story towards some sort of inevitable conclusion.

"Not exactly: there will however be a major revelation in the sixth book. From the third book onwards we're starting to shift the focus. Each book is a self-contained story with a self-contained case for Castor but we're beginning to plant the seeds of the bigger mystery of why the dead are arriving now, after so many millennia of civilisation. Is there a pattern to all of these seemingly diverse and strange events? In the fourth book there will be an earth-shaking revelation, but it won't be until the sixth book that I lay all my cards on the table and show how everything is part of one big picture. That won't necessarily be the *last* book, but it will open up elements of the story that are quite mysterious at this stage."

### The Wishing Chair vs vanilla ice cream

Carey's passion for the fantastic and its possibilities – as entertainment and as a means of conveying emotion and ideas – is apparent in his reflections on his own work and that of his fellow writers and artists. But what was the origin of his enthusiasm for the form?

"I was crazy about fantasy and science fiction as a kid – addicted to it to the extent that I read nothing else at one time. Then I kind of branched out – I read mainstream literary fiction at school and ended up doing an English degree. But for pleasure I read fantastic literature such as H.P. Lovecraft. Initially I thought horror just meant the Hammer Dracula movies, but I've always had a real love for the whole spectrum of fantastic literature. Crime fiction as well, I used to love the good old fashioned whodunits that have gone out of style now. I love noir and I love Raymond Chandler's work."

"There was obviously something in me. I can remember when I was six years old and the books I went back to again and again, until they fell apart, were the two big Enid Blyton fantasy series – the *Faraway Tree* and the *Wishing Chair*. The pattern was set from that very early age. My father-in-law is fantasy averse – almost fantasy phobic: he says he can't enjoy fiction if he feels

it isn't about something that can happen in real life. In the course of one of our arguments I said 'That's like saying you're only going to eat vanilla ice cream!' And I stand by that: it's like making a virtue of sticking to an ascetic, joyless baseline. I love fantasy because it's the third dimension of fiction: without it there's flatness, but with it anything and everything is possible."

So when did he first get the urge to create fantasies of his own?

"I discovered very early on the pleasure of having an audience. I have a brother, Dave, who is five years younger than me. When we were kids I wrote and drew comic books for him. I should say at this point I'm a really awful artist – just terrible. My knowledge of human anatomy is zero. All the characters in my stories were eggs: I did thousands and thousands of pages of eggs with arms and legs. But that was my introduction to the pleasure of being a narrator and the pleasure of turning somebody else on to my storytelling."

One of the striking characteristics of the Castor books is Carey's skill with structure: the framework is robust enough to keep the impetus of the narrative going while the author makes the occasional foray into local history, metaphysics and people watching. Does this faculty for sustaining the drive of a story stem from his earliest experience of writing comic strips?

"Writing comics is very good training for any other kind of writing for exactly that reason. It's a discipline that I was very slow to learn. I wrote a couple of abortive novels, in my late teens and early twenties, before I wrote comics professionally. They were sprawling and shapeless, twice as long as they should have been. In a comic book you become a miser: you make every panel pay its way. If you only have 22 pages in a monthly book or, say, five pages if you're doing a 'Future Shock' piece for *2000AD*, there's no room for anything extraneous to the story. You have to cut it out. When I came back to writing novels with Felix Castor, I was much more confident and, I think, more skilful in terms of deciding what had to be where and what had to go because it wasn't adding anything to the forward momentum of the story."

### The percolation of stories

So was the move from comics back to novels a significant, and perhaps unsettling, departure?

"I had an almost frightening amount of freedom. To move from the short deadlines and rigorously planned-out structures



of comics to a novel is like going from a river into the sea. You live with a novel for eight months and the length is anywhere between 100,000 and 150,000 words. But I think I had to do it that way round. I needed some boundaries. There are scenes in *Castor* that exist purely to add depth and breadth – particularly in the second book where you begin to see the infrastructure of reality has changed, partly to accommodate the risen dead. I suppose that contradicts my idea about discipline and pacing but the elements I brought from comics enabled me to tread my own path. And I hope I trod that path without losing the reader and ending up expatiating into a void.

“Actually, I must confess the draft I initially turned in for *Dead Men's Boots* was huge – it was 155,000 words. My editor reminded me that I needed to watch this tendency to go down the J.K. Rowling path of producing fatter and fatter books. He made the radical suggestion that I leave out the sequence in Alabama, but I really liked the idea of taking *Castor* and the demon Juliet into a different locale. I wanted to take them way outside their comfort zone and watch the resulting strains on the relationship. But I had to have a long hard look at that manuscript. I took out a couple of incidents that were broadly separable from the rest of the narrative, but it was hard because I was very fond of them.”

Carey's reference to the role of his editor shows that while the novelist's role is solitary for the months in which a story is created, it is, ultimately, collaborative in nature. It is, however, much less intensely interactive than the process of creating and revising comic strips.

“In comics your story is percolated through lots of other storytellers and other processes before it gets to the page. The penciller brings his or her vision to it; the inker transforms the pencil line; the colours make an enormous difference. What you get back at the end of that process has moved quite a long way from what was in your mind when you started. I've had huge good fortune in that almost all the artists I have worked with have been really talented and really in tune with what I was trying to do. There have been a few occasions where something I was trying to set up got knocked down because the artists didn't get it, or didn't choose to follow the art directions.

“What emerges is to some extent out of your hands and this is where the editor's role is crucial. Sometimes it depends how far an editor keeps the writer and the art

team in communication. A good editor – and I've had some great ones – will send you page roughs as they come in, and pencilled artwork as it comes in. That way you have the chance to give your input at each of those stages. So I might say ‘I like what you're doing but we're moving towards that last panel revelation, which is tiny and which, I think, needs to be blown up’. A bad editor leaves it to the art team and goes off for an early lunch. The next thing you know it's in print. So in that sense, yes, a novelist has far more control over the process.”

And, for Carey, effective collaboration isn't merely a matter of having the right channels of communication in place, but is critically dependent on appreciating your responsibilities to other people trying to earn a crust and understanding the constraints of the process.

“It's the difference between working to a monthly deadline and living with a story for the better part of a year. In comics, a writer is the first link in a long chain so, if you fart around, there are people further down the chain who are not able to make a living because they are waiting for your work to come in. There are days when you have to force yourself to say ‘I'm sitting at this table and won't get up until the script is done’. You're always chasing a deadline: you're writing a breakdown; you're going from breakdown to script; you're doing a polish on the script; then you're writing the next breakdown. You can't change your mind about a narrative: for *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men*, very often I'd be writing six-issue stories. If you get to Issue Three and think *Bugger I should have set up this character right at the start, at least had them appear in a cutaway panel*, it's too late. If a better idea occurs to you as a narrative unfolds there's nothing you can do. But in a novel you have what I can only call ‘vertical freedom’, if something occurs to you in Chapter Twenty you *can* go back and mess around with Chapter Three.”

### A huge intellectual puzzle

There's another critical difference between Carey's work as a novelist and his role as a writer of comics: in the *Castor* books he creates his own mythic structures and characters, but in much of his work for comics and graphic novels he is inheriting them. In a couple of instances, he has remixed stories for a new medium. One was a comic book adaptation of a *Fantastic Four* movie; the other was his adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* from novel to comic book form.

“*Neverwhere* was a hugely enjoyable experience – I'd read the novel when it came out and enjoyed it enormously. It was like a huge intellectual puzzle at first: we took apart the novel and looked at how all the bits and pieces fitted together. Then we decided which bits to keep, which bits to change, which bits to keep but with a twist and which bits to leave out of the comic book story. We did this really meticulously, scene-by-scene and line-by-line, until we'd turned the novel into a breakdown for the comic. We then sent that off to Neil to get his thoughts on what we were trying to do. It was a fascinating and creative piece of problem solving.”

But almost impossible, I suggest, unless you had a massive amount of experience of structuring strips.

“It certainly helped to have written 200 comic books already. We made a couple of big global changes on the basis of that experience. The novel jumps between various points of view but we used the central character, Richard Mayhew, as a first person narrator. We did that very consciously as it allowed us to determine what the audience does and doesn't know at certain points. And, while you can have a third person omniscient point of view in comics, it seems very dated unless there's a reason to do it. It stinks of late 1970s, early 1980s strips and it's almost never used now. People began to realise how clunking and strange it was in a medium where the balance of storytelling was visual, not verbal. Either they told you what you were already seeing or, even worse, used it as a bridge to cover things you weren't seeing but damn well ought to have been. In its heyday it covered failures in communication between editors, writers and artists and produced some weird, elliptical storytelling, leaving the reader puzzled as to whose voice they were listening to.”

This adaptation work is far from typical of Carey's work on comic books, but the bulk of bread-and-butter work on comics involves writing stories for characters created by earlier writers. I ask him how he feels about picking up the creative batons passed on – or dropped – by other writers.

“There's an interesting essay by Ursula Le Guin, where she compares the Soviet system of state control of the arts, this is before the Wall fell, with the American system of market control. In the USSR there was state censorship – a lot of stories that could never be told because the state wouldn't allow you to tell them. In the United States, on the other hand, there is censorship by the



market. The example that springs to mind is Vonda McIntyre, who wrote two terrific early novels and a story collection with some gems in it, then went on to write *Star Trek* for five or six years – because she had to earn a living. In the USSR, at least people managed to use speculative fiction to write novels that attacked the system through their use of metaphor. I'm thinking, for example, of *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin.

"Writing other people's characters is a defining feature of the comic books mainstream – I suppose it applies to writing for TV too. Most successful comic book characters have been around for decades. There's an enormous amount of conservatism in the comic book mainstream in America and in Britain. So it's easier to reinvent the X-Men than it is to launch a new book with a completely new set of characters. But, following from Le Guin's point, the pressures of the market mean there's a sense in which we all use other people's characters all the time."

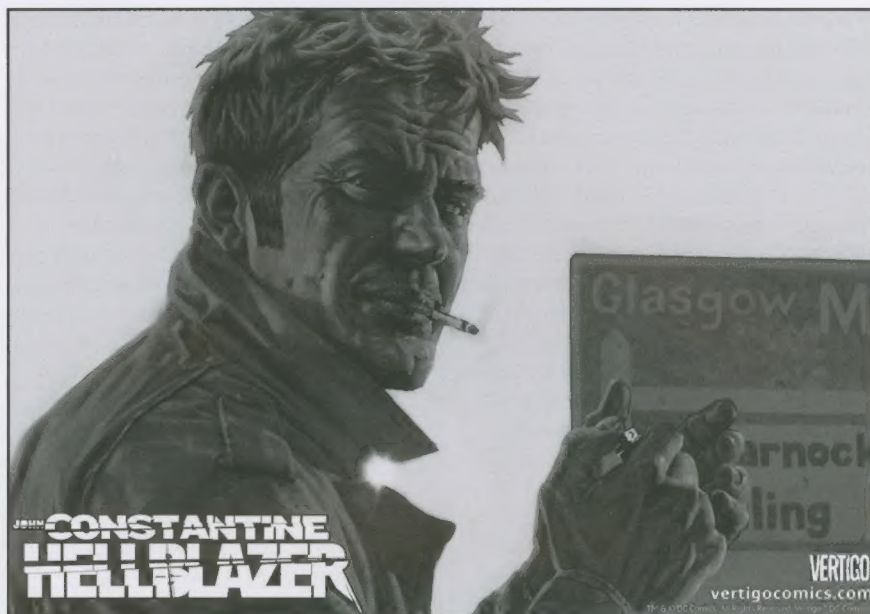
### Debts of continuity

But, I ask, has his work on stories that have extended or developed someone else's work involved a different kind of thinking and a different kind of creativity?

"When I came to work on *X-Men* and *Hellblazer* I felt I owed an absolute debt to the continuity of previous narratives. Chesterton said something about the difference between material miracles and moral miracles. Your audience will accept any number of material miracles, but as soon as you have a character do something that makes no sense in terms of motivation you've lost the audience. So, if you take over the *X-Men* and suddenly decide to make Wolverine gay, you're in trouble because it makes no sense in terms of his motivation up to that point. You have to ground psychological changes in things that happen to the character – mess with the psychology of characters at your peril.

"The *X-Men* have 30 years of continuity: I would not be exaggerating to say there were four to five thousand issues of *X-Men* material out there. There's a vast corpus of material – so you have to put in the spade work. I was an *X-Men* fan and I'd read an awful lot of the material, but it still took me several months to get completely up to speed. But what could be better than immersing yourself in a big pile of comics and saying 'I'm working'? I was thrilled to do the *X-Men* because I go back such a long way with those characters."

But what is it that draws Carey to



superhero stories, in spite of the reaction against them in recent years? Why is he clearly so passionate about a form in which hand-me-down characters bring debts of psychological continuity and other creative limitations?

"A lot of serious comic writers won't touch them at any cost but, at their best, they produce marvellous, powerful and extremely enjoyable stories like Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol*, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*. I have a deep affection for the *X-Men* because they brought me back to comics at a time when I had stopped reading them. That goes back to Chris Claremont's reinvention of the team in the early 1980s. Even further back I went round Fazakerley and Aintree, looking for specific issues in every newsagent. The distribution was shambolic in those days and we had to pick up a copy whenever we could: we'd read episode one of a *Fantastic Four* or *X-Men* story and then stand a one-in-four chance of catching the next episode."

As our conversation unfolds it becomes clear that Carey's work on another inherited character, *Lucifer*, proved a pivotal point in his career and had an enormously formative impact on his development as a writer.

"*Lucifer* was my first gig for Vertigo. It was a tremendous challenge to adapt a world myth and push it in a new direction, but it was a dream job too. If you'd asked me five years earlier what my ultimate ambition was, it would have included writing a spinoff series for *Sandman*. Neil Gaiman provided a major source of inspiration when he created this huge

stage on which all these various world mythologies can coexist – Judaeo-Christian archangels meet Japanese gods meet North American Indian gods. It was wonderful to play on that stage. The challenge was in making *Lucifer* a protagonist: there are certain things you can't have him do. You can't have him in a traditional fight, you have to put him in a different kind of story and articulate about him in a different way. Through my own distorting lens it became a story about family relationships – as a lot of my stories do. We got away with making *Lucifer* the son of God and we partly did that by never mentioning Jesus at all. God has three sons – Michael, Gabriel and *Lucifer*. Gabriel is out of the picture before the story starts, presumably dead, but the relationship with Michael becomes central as the story plays out. And it becomes a story of escaping your father's influence.

"While I was working on *Lucifer* I got a call from Will Dennis, the editor of *Hellblazer* at that time. He called and asked if I would like a crack at the story after Brian Azzarello stopped writing it. Initially I turned him down because I couldn't imagine writing to two deadlines. A few years later I was writing to four or five. Luckily, he called me back, I succumbed, and he liked my ideas. Writing John Constantine was a marvellous experience. Everyone writes him a little bit differently, bringing a little of themselves into the mix: in Garth Ennis' run there's a big emphasis on Constantine's friendship group, the pub as the place that cements those friendships and you get the Lord of the Dance appearing as a major character; Warren



Ellis writes something darker and colder, more like urban horror; Azzarello gives you more of an American road movie version of Constantine. It's not like the *X-Men* because you get a high degree of freedom: this is probably because Constantine stands by itself, while the *X-Men* is a franchise with half a dozen books being written at any one time. In that situation you're part of a team wrangled by several different editors."

### Where universes intersect

Carey's work hasn't been confined to comics and novels, he has also worked on film scripts. imdb.com identifies two projects in progress and refers to a 2002 animated film of *Tristan and Isolde* (*Tristan et Iseut*). I haven't seen an interview in which Carey talks about this film so I ask if the script was by another Mike Carey. There's an extremely long and nerve wracking pause when I put this question. In a naff comedy sketch it would be highlighted by a cutaway shot of tumbleweed skittering across a desolate landscape. I'm beginning to wonder if I've caused offence.

"Yes, alright, OK, it was me. That was an appalling movie: it passed beyond all infinite dimensions of possible badness. But, yes, yes, it was me. What is invisible in relation to this is lots of work I did for European TV companies off the back of *Tristan et Iseut*. It was a bad film but it was a good script. The guy who was doing it approached a German TV company for funding and showed them the screenplay. They did eventually come up with money for the film but they also approached me to work on some TV projects. I have had three or four years happily writing away on TV animation scripts as a result of this awful film – I must have done around three dozen of them."

The other films listed for Mike Carey are *Red King* and *Frost Flowers* – the latter slated for release in 2009 and set to star the quirky and beautiful Holly Hunter.

"*Red King* is just in outline at this stage. *Frost Flowers* is an erotic ghost story, and I say erotic to avoid the word pornographic as it does have some very intense and very explicit sequences in it. It's the story of David and Cora. David becomes romantically and sexually obsessed with Cora, a dead woman who lived in the same building as him but a hundred years before. He's an actor and she was an actress when she was alive. Now she's dead but she's a voyeur: she's one of the very rare dead people who still see the living. Most dead people must have no contact with the living world at all: they still hang around

in the same streets and buildings but they are invisible to us and we are invisible to them. Cora can see the living and she likes to watch people having sex. It kind of warms her up a bit to see people having what she can't have any more. David and Cora eventually drift into each other's orbit and really it's about how that relationship plays out. Without giving too much away, the relationship does become physical – he discovers there's a way to cross over into the world of the dead and touch Cora."

The discussion veering back to the issue of spirits and undead souls allows me the opportunity to ask Carey if he accepts the notion of an afterlife or whether it simply provides a useful metaphorical and narrative structure for his storytelling.

"I'm not a believer and I'm not a thoroughgoing sceptic. My mother saw ghosts everywhere, she had stories relating to all of the houses we lived in, but I have never seen anything. I don't believe in ghosts as extensions of human life after death, but I'm what you might call an animist, I believe there are universes of spirit and of matter, and I believe we exist at the point where these universes intersect. So there's nothing in the material world that can adequately explain what consciousness is. I believe, therefore, that rationalism can only go so far in explaining the way things work, but I don't believe in life after death in any conventional sense."

### Speculative perspectives and other stories for girls

Carey's work on graphic stories targeted specifically at teenage girls is a fascinating departure: there's *My Faith in Frankie*, with art by Sonny Liew and Marc Hempel; *Regifters*, again with Liew and Hempel; and *Confessions of a Blabbermouth*, produced in collaboration with his teenage daughter Louise Carey and Aaron Alexovich. So how did this new venture come about?

"In writing *Lucifer* I became more and more interested in female characters: it became a book with a huge female cast. And I discovered *Lucifer* played best against a cast of strong female characters. There's Mazikeen, his sometime lover who takes the title Morningstar when *Lucifer* leaves the building, so to speak, or leaves this creation; Elaine Belloc, his niece and daughter of the Archangel Michael; and Jill Presto, the stage magician who becomes a vessel for a godlike daughter. It was very interesting and rewarding to write their interactions with *Lucifer*, with them occasionally getting the better of him at times, or at least coming

out even, which no one else ever does.

"So, after I'd enjoyed all that, I came up with the idea for *My Faith in Frankie*, about a teenage girl with her own god. In a way it had the same conceptual frame as *Lucifer*, but it played as a romantic comedy. From a sales point of view it bombed, but it was well reviewed and we had a lot of fun."

At that time Carey's editor at Vertigo, Shelley Bond, had begun working on Minx, a new graphic novels imprint aimed at teenage girls. On the basis of the critical response to *My Faith in Frankie*, Bond asked Carey to try out for the new line. The results were *Regifters* and *Confessions of a Blabbermouth*. So is there a qualitative difference between writing mainstream comics and producing material targeted at a young female audience?

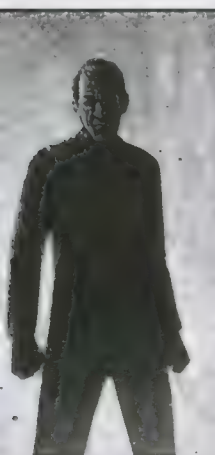
"It does involve using different muscles – it's a different style of storytelling. For *Frankie* and *Regifters* I had to turn myself into a teenage girl to tell the story: and it's a perspective I've never been able to take in the real world. In that sense, these books were more speculative – and more fantastic – than anything else I've ever written. I don't really know how realistic the characters are, of course, but writing for girls was always creatively interesting."

I ask Carey if working with his daughter had been an advantage in this respect, or if it had merely created new challenges.

"Initially, *Blabbermouth* was very difficult – but it got easier. Shelley asked us to have a go and our initial reaction was to laugh. When we decided to do it I found it hard, at first, to treat Lou as an equal collaborator. It was her first comic strip and it was my 350<sup>th</sup>, or whatever, and I found myself telling her how to do things – art direction, paste dialogue, panel breaks... She needed that input for the first few scenes but, after that, when she didn't I was still on her back, you can't do this, you can't do that... So she had to turn round and say to me 'I have an editor'. She insisted on doing her full half, and wouldn't let me get away with doing more than my share just because I was faster. She's very much her own person and refused to let me 'help' her in ways that limited her involvement.

"It was great, we both came away feeling proud of what we'd done and it was also a learning experience in terms of our relationship. I'd do it again, but it's hard work. In the process of doing this I discovered teenage girls have fuller and more complicated lives than middle aged men – complicated by social pressures and GCSEs. Her life is very full." ☼





# THE ENDLING

## JAMIE BARRAS

As she closed on the nearest iceberg and painted it with sound. It spoke back to her in whispers, telling her that it was too amorphous to warrant a close approach. She let the current carry her to the next berg. This one rang like a bell when she echoed it. Much better; she surged forward, pushing through cross-currents that tugged at her surface tropes, and settled over the berg. Then she fired up her photolumisols, spread out her diffraction mat, and started her scan.

"Where should I be looking?"

"Nmibi's Forge. There's a small, diamond-shaped cluster of stars, strength two to three, between the hammer and the anvil. See them?"

Antonov called up his star map. The routine took only a moment to find the constellation for him: a claw-like sweep of stars in the middle sky. Antonov centred the picture window over the stars then blinked, once, twice, zooming in. "I see them. Where now?"

"Okay: head north from the easternmost star in that group about as far as the distance from that star to its nearest neighbour – that's the place."

Antonov made the necessary adjustments then called up the position lock. He studied the image caught in the frame: a faint glow like a tiny drop of red paint dispersing through a vast black sea. He launched his star-picking routine; it flashed back NO OBJECTS FOUND. Antonov captured the image and closed the picture window. He turned towards Wright, and found that he was staring at him again.

Wright stepped back and rocked his head from side to side. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've got to stop doing that, I know." His lips twitched in a nervous smile.

His voice was high-pitched and scratchy, like a heavily compressed audio. The Melzemi had replaced his respiratory system to allow him to breathe Fesquin's air – this was a legacy of that. He bore other signs of his long captivity: the twitches and finger-flutters that accompanied his speech – gestures that he could only have picked up from the Hila child type – and his accent, the way that he spoke Englac, with a lilt rich in the complex rhythms of Child Common.

When the Stro floater touched down in the reservation and he saw that there was an *Acheron* human on board, he had wept like a child.

"Stare all you want," said Antonov, "I'm not bashful."

Wright laughed – a natural, unforced, *human* sound.

"The siting of the reservation was deliberate?" Antonov gestured up at the night sky. "This is the reason why they built it here?"

Wright's expression darkened. "Yes. They had it all worked out: for five base-years, starting nearly sixty base-years after we got here, Earth's murdered sun was the brightest object in the sky."

The air filled with the hiss of static – the wind rolling in across the grasslands. It tugged at Antonov's data weaves, and his nursemaid appeared, telling him that the ambient temperature had dropped by three degrees. He keyed his heater.

"How many of your fellow captives had died by then?" Wright had been just one of over 8,000 human beings that the Melzemi had removed from the nascent Terran colony on Chard IVe.

Wright touched his chin to his chest. "3,917." He caught Antonov's look of inquiry. "They opened the reservation archives to me –" he gestured back behind them, towards the reservation "– eighty base-years ago, now. Every detail of every death was recorded."

"Nearly half of your fellow captives died in the first sixty base-years, then – victims of the agent experiments?"

"Mostly, yes. Although, at the time, we knew nothing of that – people just...disappeared." Wright squeezed shut his eyes and tipped back his head. "The first we heard about the agent was when the Melzemi told us that they'd used it to wipe out the VXIIers, so, now, we were all that was left of the human race. I suppose we should be grateful that they didn't dispose of the rest of us at the same time."





"There was no need, you weren't a threat to them."

Wright looked sharply at Antonov, and Antonov felt his cheeks flush. He hated this job, hated that Zhukhova-Antonov had fought so hard to win the contract. He pressed on. "There were no births here?"

Wright rocked his head from side to side: no. He touched a hand to his chest. "The breathers weren't the only things they put inside us."

"So, over the years, the numbers continued to fall?"

"Yes."

"Until...?"

"Until eventually I was the only one left. Yes."

There was a catch in Wright's voice, like corrupted data. The Melzemi had kept secret from the ChIVe captives the fact that the Stro had returned to the ruins of the Earth and recovered what would one day become the crew of the *Acheron*. So, as far as the ChIVe captives had been aware, the only people other than them to have escaped the destruction of the human home system had been the population of a second nascent Terran colony, Pridac XVII. And the Melzemi had used the viral agent that they had developed using the ChIVe captives as research subjects to kill off the XVIIers. So, once the last of Wright's fellow captives had died, as far as Wright had known, he had become the last human being alive, the final gasp at the finish line of the human race. The ending.

"When was that – when did the last of your fellow captives die?"

"Oka 29."

Antonov had to call down his Melzemi overlay to perform the

date conversation. "276 base-years ago?"

"Yes."

"But you're still around."

"Yes." Wright's gaze returned to the night sky.

"You have to see it from the Stro's point of view," said Antonov. "They didn't expect to find any ChIVe captives alive, not after nearly 400 base-years."

"I understand."

"But you, you're still around. Thousands died in the agent experiments, and the Melzemi allowed everyone else here to just wither and die – everyone but you."

"No – I died too."

"Yes, but then the Melzemi re-grew you."

"And you want to know why they did that?"

"Yes."

Wright was silent for a long time. But, eventually, he looked at Antonov and said, "For the same reason that the Stro retrieved the *Acheron* humans from deep space, Merchant-officer Antonov, after they had gone to all the trouble of sending you out there in the first place. They did it because they needed somebody that was something close to human to stop Elena Andalian."

Back reflections of the unit cell played over Asha's diffraction mat. She stored the dimensions in chiral sugars fused with one of her filaments and moved on to the iceberg's next lattice plane. As she moved she felt resistance in her tropes and awoke to how cold her surroundings had become. She had been so focussed on what she was doing that she had failed to detect a slackening of the current in the surrounding mesotypes and corresponding fall in temperature. She was the wrong side of the *nous* ship's brain/floe barrier – a long way from the radiant heat put out by the *nous* ship's core.

She cursed herself for not having done a more thorough survey – she had no idea how long this drop in the strength of the current would last. Would it be safe to wait it out, or should she retreat?

She was in uncharted waters.

Called 83 In Honour Of Another Of That Name grasped a travelling epiphyte, scaring off the water droplets adhered to its leaves. He watched the water droplets fly off and break over several nearby vines. Within moments, slowly-spinning balls of water filled the air, sparkling in the glow from the chamber's epithelial lights like stars in the outer night.

Called 83 moved deeper into the chamber, coasting from vine to vine. He could hear distant voices, muffled by the intervening greenery, sounding out from somewhere above him. He started towards them. The air was fresh and tart – rich with the scents of the circling-forest. That sudden thought of home stole away Called 83's breath and brought tears to his eyes. He blinked, shook his head, steadied his breathing, and pressed on.

"Is the bombardment over?"

Called 83 twisted on the vine and watched as Called Redback floated towards him, scattering water droplets as he came. "Yes. We will be moving off soon."

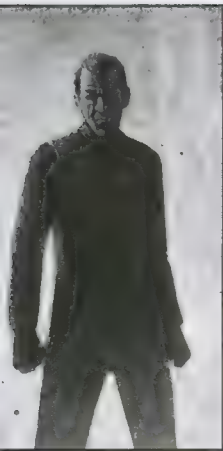
Called Redback settled onto a vine opposite and whistled. "This isn't the way. This...violence."

"I agree – but what can we do?"

Called Redback puffed out his chest. "Are the Far-Beyonders so weak?"

The hiss of fluttering leaves and splash of colliding water droplets suddenly filled the air. Called 83 felt the vine to which he was clinging begin to vibrate. Somewhere deeper inside the thicket frighten-





ed neonates began to hoot and screech. The epithelial lights dimmed.

"The Hila have re-awoken the Expression," he said. "We are leaving."

Called Redback shifted. "Our people were hunters. We are hunters."

Called 83 had had this argument too many times before. He brought his hand away from the vine and beat at the air. "And the Hila are murderers of children – it is written into their being. Give them cause and they will kill us all."

"They need us."

"No. They keep us so that they needn't tend to the ship themselves, but they don't need us."

Called Redback grunted. He seemed ready to continue the argument, but then he tipped his head to one side and passed his hand over his eyes. "I will tell the others to prepare for a return to the outer night."

Called 83 watched Called Redback move off. Then he turned away and launched himself back towards the chamber opening. The re-awakening of the Expression had altered his plans. He needed to return to the fibre nexus and find out what world they would batter next.

.....  
If Asha lingered too long the wrong side of the brain/floe barrier, she risked dissociation. But, set against that, she wanted to know what it was that she had found, what secrets the iceberg contained, because it belonged to the neo-nous, and the neo-nous was something new – a completely new formulation of the *nous* ship's liquid-crystal mesomind. The patterns within the neo-nous had originated outside the *nous*-ship, with a shoal of beings that had penetrated the *nous*-ship's siliceous shell and migrated inwards through the ice floes towards its core. The invaders' arrival had triggered a battle for control with the ship's original mesomind, a battle that the original mesomind had lately lost. Their victory won, the invaders had gone about transforming themselves into the neo-nous, rewriting all the mesomind's tropes with their own patterns. And then, they had built a back-up memory in a chamber outside the mesomind, fusing their secrets with the icebergs that the chamber contained.

Who were these invaders, what were those secrets? Asha wanted to know, and had come a long way to find out. She drew in some acid traces and metallotropes from the surrounding mesotypes to construct an exotherm, and pressed on with her diffraction measurements.

.....  
"The people here couldn't tell her where to find the human race, so she destroyed the outpost from orbit? The whole outpost?"

"She is mad."

Wright clenched his teeth to fight off the urge to laugh. He knew the feeling. He shifted his grip on the travelling vine, turning away from the Melzem and back towards the imaging tank. A grey stain was slowly spreading across the blue-green surface of the planet below – the remains of the Melzemi outpost, the 3,000 souls that it had contained, and the million-tonne siliceous mass that the fugitives had thrown at it from orbit, all turned to ashes by the force of the impact.

Ashes. Everywhere Wright went, everywhere he had ever been: ashes. His stomach churned; he turned back to the Melzem. "Hasn't anybody told her that the human race is run?"

"She is chasing ghosts," said the Melzem, as if that was the answer.

Unlike Wright, he was floating free, poised in the air above and behind the imaging tank, with his rear third tucked up under his mid-section and his four legs entwined, giving him the appearance of a three-metre-tall exclamation mark. Cleaner motes fluttered around him, keeping the air that he breathed clear of detritus. He swept one of his huge hands through the air, fluttering his fingers – Melzemi for a shrug. "She must be stopped."

Wright again had to fight the urge to laugh. "And this is why you re-grew me – to act as bait?" This was the sixth Melzemi outpost that Elena Andalian had destroyed across the past two base-years. Thus far, all the Melzemi's attempts to stop her had failed. Wright recognised his revival for what it was: an act of desperation on the Melzemi's part.

"You are human."

Wright felt his face flush. "I was. I was human. Now, I'm..." He didn't have words; he couldn't frame the concept. He rocked his head from side to side. "Why couldn't you have left me dead? Why did you have to bring me back?"

He was raging at the end of it. Spittle tumbled away from his mouth, driven by his rasping breath. A cleaner mote zipped right in and sucked it up. Seeing that, Wright surrendered to the urge to laugh. And once he had started, he couldn't stop himself.

The Melzem dipped his head in a gesture of disquiet. "You should calm yourself, ending."

"No!" Wright moved, hand over hand, along the length of the vine towards the Melzem. "What I should do is put a gap gun to my head and pull the trigger!"

The Melzem stared down at Wright. After a long moment, he said, softly, "Don't you remember, ending? You have already done just that – three times now. And three times we have re-grown you, here, in the ship's own garden. Don't you remember?"

Wright screwed shut his eyes. No, he did not remember – was the Melzem lying, or had the Melzemi left out those memories when they re-assembled his mind? He was garden-grown, the bio-engineered fruit of an artificial Eden – the edited highlights of the man that he used to be, a poor facsimile. And he was suddenly very tired. He let go of the vine and just hung in space. "When will this end?" he croaked.

"When you deliver Elena Andalian to us."

A child floated up towards them from the heart of the fibre nexus and reported that they had picked up the errant farship's trail. The Melzem whistled, the crew dived into action; and the Melzemi farship slipped back into the outer night.

.....  
The 'now' of the beings that had become the neo-nous was a mystery to Asha. The patterns that they had formed within the mesotypes were unlike any that she had ever mapped. She could discern the make-up of the patterns by painting the cross-talk between the lyotropic plates that formed the larger part of the mesomind, but she could not fathom their meaning. That was why she had decided to cross the brain/floe barrier and trust her tropes to the arterial ice floes of the ship's siliceous outer layers. She was gambling that the neo-nous had co-opted the read/write memory-storage template of the ship's original mesomind rather than waste time coming up with one of its own. There amongst the icebergs, she was hoping to find memories she could read – visual memories not dependent on a deep understanding of the mental processes of the neo-nous.

Something buffeted her, unravelling a section of her surface. It was the current returning, bringing with it warmth drawn all the way from the ship's core. She felt her every trope loosen and relax. She revelled in it for a moment. Then she gathered in fresh tropes



from the surrounding mesotypes, rebuilt the damaged section of her surface and returned to the task of reading the berg.

Water glistened on the epithelial lights like dew on long grass. Mist filled the air. It was like the coming of the dawn, and it was frightening.

"What is happening?" hooted Called Patches as he swam towards Called 83. He was amongst the youngest of the Far-Beyonders to have accepted a new name from Elena Called Andalian, and near as tall as a Hila.

Called Redback and a half a dozen others followed close on Called Patches' heels; Called 83 waited until they were all within earshot before speaking. "We have arrived in an area of sky filled with dust. It is the dust striking the ship's shell that makes it shake so."

"Are we in danger?" someone asked.

Called Redback twisted around in the air, coming to rest alongside Called 83. "No," he said. He turned to Called 83. "We are safe within the ship's embrace, isn't that so?"

All eyes were on Called 83. He rolled his shoulders to avoid being turned upside down by the breeze that spiralled through the passageway. His fur was sodden, and it was a struggle drawing breath in the damp heat. "I...the ship does not think that there is any danger."

"But why are we here? Why do we not leave?" someone asked. Several others took up the question.

Called Redback asked for quiet. As the squall of voices died away, Called 83 thanked Called Redback and then said, "There is an object within the dust cloud, as large as a world, but not a world. This object is clearing a path through the dust cloud. The Hila mean the ship to take us into its shadow, out of the dust. We will find the going easier there."

"But why -"

"We've arrived, haven't we?" put in Called Redback.

Called 83 dipped his head, triggering a chorus of hoots and whistles from the other Far-Beyonders. Raising his voice to make himself heard, he said, simply, "Yes. The trail ends here."

Called Redback's eyes grew cold. "And the Hila?"

Called 83 rocked his head from side to side. "They are readying the missile-thrower."

Called Redback hissed. "We cannot allow them to shoot." He let the breeze carry him closer to Called 83 and laid a hand on his arm. "Called 83 In Honour Of Another Of That Name, we cannot allow this."

Called 83 placed his hand over Called Redback's and dipped his head. "You are right. I see that now. That was why I was on my way back to the inner forest."

Called Redback hooted and turned to the other Far-Beyonders. "Called Patches, Called Nine, return to the inner forest and spread the word. It is time."

"We should approach the fibre nexus from many different directions," said Called 83, "to take advantage of our -"

Called Redback silenced him with a squeeze of the arm. He bared his teeth in a smile. "We've been planning this hunt for a long time - all is prepared."

Called 83 felt his fingers burn with shame. He had known nothing of this. Before their journey had started, the Hila had singled him out and used him to deliver their demands to the Beyonders. Ever since, to his own people, he had spoken with the voice of the Hila. Of course, they had told him nothing. "Is there...is there a place for me in the hunt?"

"Called 83 In Honour Of Another Of That Name, there is a place for every Far-Beyonder in this hunt."

Asha soon had plate dimensions enough to justify shuffling the sugars that she had stored on one of her filaments in towards her reader. The process went quickly in the returned warmth, and within a few short minutes, she had the information that she needed: the crystal packing within the berg matched that employed by the original mesomind when building its own memories. Her gamble was paying off. She started to spin her mimetic fabrications...

*The heat of two suns, the tug of their two gravities; and, beyond the suns, a dozen bands of rainbow light fringing on as many rings as dark as night.* It was a view of a proto-planetary system somewhere within a nebula, the observer set somewhere above the system plane and distant from the system's double sun. It was reasonable to suppose that the nebula was the nebula through which the *nous* ship itself was travelling, but the proto-system did not match any that Asha knew of. And there was something about the image: it had the look of a composite, something formed from many partial images, one overlapping the next - as if the product of a hive mind.

A hive mind; Asha felt a thrill: were the beings that had taken over the mesomind kin to the antecedents of the *nous*? It would explain how they had triumphed so quickly. Was this proto-system then the cradle of the *nous* of the *nous* ships? It was too fantastic an idea - but, if the memories she was mining truly did contain the pieces of a map that showed the way to the cradle of the mesominds, she would be able to name her own price with the schools of the *Agora*. There would be no limit to how far she would be able to afford to travel.

A new sensation washed over her, taking her unawares. It was a desire to be amongst people again; and, within only a few short moments, that desire had grown into a longing and overwhelmed her.

"It is larger than any two normal rocky worlds," said the Melzem. He turned to the nearest child. "Is the ship sure that it is a solid mass?"

"It is solid as far inwards as she is able to see, Speaker-Of-Commands. But there are channels through it at all depths."

The Melzem dismissed that last piece of information with a flick of the hand. "How deep is the ship able to see?"

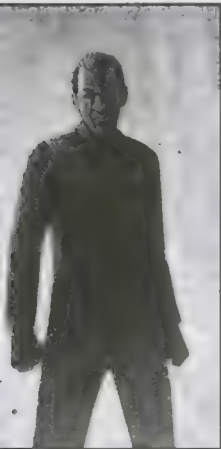
The child named a depth as great as the diameter of half the rocky worlds that Wright had ever heard of. Then it said, "But it appears to be layered, Speaker-of-Commands"

Wright stretched closer to the imaging tank and studied the wanderer in more detail. How old would something like that need to be to grow to such a size simply through accretion?

An alarm sounded. The Melzem demanded information. A second child floated over to him and reported that they had entered the wanderer's bow wave. And as it spoke, Wright noticed an increase in the vibration that he could feel through the vine to which he was clinging. Even though they were cocooned in active dampers, the storm of dust particles through which they were plunging was still able to make its presence felt.

The first child asked the Melzem permission to move clear. The Melzem hissed and rocked its head from side to side. "No," he said. "Not when we are so close." He stabbed a finger at the imaging tank and a target marker centred on a point in the wanderer's upper right quadrant. A subsidiary volume in the lower part of the tank showed the target in more detail. It was floating a few tens of kilometres above the surface of the wanderer; a truncated cone perhaps four times as long as its width at its base, with a taper so





sharp that its width decreased by at least an order of magnitude from its base to its apex. Its surface was mostly carapace, pitted, scarred – and beetle-black, even in the ruddy-orange glow of the nebula – but there were areas of soft tissue too, particularly near the apex. A glyph floating alongside the image in the tank gave the object's length in base units; Wright did the conversion: it was almost 800 metres from top to bottom. A baby of its class – the Melzem farship was over three times the size, and still growing.

"I want that child," said the Melzem, and he gave the order to load the catapult.

Wright turned away from the imaging tank and climbed the fibre towards the Melzem. "Wait," he said. "Why am I here if you're just going to destroy her?"

"In case she runs, ending," the Melzem said. "She is good at running. Hearing you will give her pause."

Wright's thoughts raced. "Then...then...then let me talk to her now, get her attention before she even thinks of running."

"And warn her of our presence?"

"Speaker-Of-Commands?" The Melzem turned to the child hovering at his shoulder. The child pressed its hands to its forehead in obeisance. "There is heat rising from the bow of the errant child. She is loading her own catapult."

How long had Asha been mining *nous*-ship memories for the *Agora*? Her mail packets came time-stamped, but Asha had long since stopped taking note of such things – as Gespen, the master mesophrast, had told her that she would. Time meant little within the *nous* of the *nous* ships. There was no night or day, no seasons. There were currents that ebbed and flowed through the mesomind, thought processes that gave a sense of direction to the ever-shifting mesotypes of the lyotropic plates and nematic/smectic boundary zones; but these motions were chaotic, acyclic. Asha rested and reintegrated only when entropy threatened to pull her apart. And when she slept, she dreamt of the distant past, of memories that she had mined.

How long had it been since she had arrived, diseased and dying, at the schools of the *Agora* and they had offered her this second shot at life, this chance to slough off her flesh and live on purely as self within the bounds of the mesomind of a *nous*?

The Hila rose up from the centre of the fibre nexus to be met by a hail of missiles. They reeled, and several started to tumble, but most recovered quickly; and even before the Far-Beyonders could refill their slingshots, the first Hila spears were slicing through the air towards them.

Called 83 twisted and tucked himself up into a ball as a Hila spear flew towards him. It hissed past, trailing water vapour. He heard it bury its tip in the surface of the tunnel somewhere over his shoulder. Immediately, he began to straighten, but at the same moment something struck him a glancing blow and he careened across the tunnel opening and collided with its lip. He started to tumble. Instinctively, he reached towards the stalk of an epithelial light as it moved past his line of sight. He missed. Shaking his head to clear his vision, he grabbed for a second light. This time his aim was true.

A shadow rushed by above him, and, a moment later, something warm and wet struck his cheek. His vision cleared at last, and he

saw that the shadow was a Far-Beyonder with a spear buried in his chest. It was Called Patches. His mouth was open, but his eyes were squeezed shut. He fell past Called 83 into the fibre nexus; a stream of blood droplets followed after him.

Called Patches was screaming. The sound of shouting, cursing, filled the whole fibre nexus, punctuated with the hiss of thrown spears and sling-shot bone shards, and the thud of them finding a target. Called 83 felt the bile rise in his throat. He swallowed and rocked his head from side to side to clear it. Then he spun around, let go of the stalk of the epithelial and pushed against the lip of the opening with his feet, launching himself into the fray.

Detail built on detail: rocky agglomerates orbited the twin-suns of the proto-planetary system – wandering planetismals that had fallen into the deepening gravity well. Nurseries of the proto-*nous* – could it really be so? Or was it foolish of Asha to dream? And what would she find waiting for her if she did earn equity enough to buy her way out of her contract with the *Agora*?

Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and all the rest, had recoiled in horror when the schools had offered up mesolife as the only way that they knew that Asha and her companions might escape the fate that had already overtaken their fellow XVIIers. But, Asha had been tired of running, of watching the Melzemi virus kill them off, one by one. She had broken ranks, run away. If, by some miracle, Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and all the rest, had found a counter-agent, were they still alive? How long had it been? And even if Asha found them still alive would they accept her back amongst them, given what had passed between them?

Wright closed on the nexus' sounding box. He cleared his throat and spoke. "Elena Andalian... Calling Elena Andalian... This is the Melzemi farship calling Elena Andalian..."

"I... I'm not Melzemi. My name is Taylor Wright. If you're searching for humankind, as you claim, you should talk to me, because, as little as there is of me that might still be called human, it's all that there is left in the universe."

Silence. For long seconds, silence. Elena Andalian had killed tens of thousands of sapient beings because they had told her something that she had not wanted to hear – that the human race was run. What sense then, Wright wondered, in trying to talk sense to her?

The sounding box sighed, and the next moment, a voice sounded deep within it. "You are wrong, Taylor Wright. Cross over to me, and I will show you that you are wrong."

The voice was rich, but markedly feminine – and youthful. The Melzem grunted, drawing Wright's attention his way. He dipped his head. "Tell her you agree. Tell her we'll ready a shiftboat and you will cross over to her as soon as we come within range."

It was a lie, a ploy to gain time to allow the Melzemi farship to get into the optimum firing position. But Wright was barely listening. What had Elena Andalian meant when she had said that he was wrong? What had brought her to the nebula, and this accreted mass larger than most worlds?

"Tell her," pressed the Melzem.

And then an alarm began to sound.

The planetismals were slick with organics – accreted material picked up in the course of their wanderings, most likely transferred from a fully-formed planetary system deeper within the nebula. Were these organics the fuel that had powered the growth of mesolife? Asha worked on, scanning, reading, storing. *Equity untold, and freedom from her contract with the Agora*. Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and



all the rest: what had become of them?

A Far-Beyond struck at the Hila with her short stabbing spear. The Hila easily avoided it. His legs wrapped around an epiphyte, he reached out and took hold of the Far-Beyond's wrist as her momentum carried her towards him. Then he twisted around and dashed her brains out against one of the vines at his back.

As he pushed her corpse away from him, a second Far-Beyond attacked him from above. He had no time to twist clear, but he was able to exploit his greater reach and take hold of the Far-Beyond's stabbing spear in both hands as the Far-Beyond lunged towards him. Still anchored to the vine, he shifted the spear's trajectory away from his body and started to pull it and the Far-Beyond towards him. The Far-Beyond responded by releasing the spear then pushing against its shaft to try to take him out of the Hila's reach. But the Hila was too fast; he stretched out and caught the Far-Beyond's ankle as he moved by. Then he hauled him in and swung him round, sending him crashing into the vines behind him.

The next moment, Called 83 finally closed the distance between them and plunged his stabbing spear into the Hila's back. The impact tore the spear from his grasp and he continued forward and collided with the Hila's shoulder. The Hila roared with rage and pain and began to turn around. Called 83 fastened his arms about the Hila's neck. He knew he had to stop the Hila from getting his hands on him, or else suffer the fate of the two Far-Beyonders that had reached the Hila before him.

The Hila began to reach back with one arm to take hold of Called 83. Tightening his grip on the Hila's neck, Called 83 brought his body around and beat at the Hila's approaching arm with his feet. But, in an instant, he realised his mistake. He quickly changed tactics, trapping the Hila's upper arm between his legs. Then he arched his back, tightening his grip on both the Hila's neck and his arm.

Something crashed into Called 83's head. He twisted around in time to see the clenched fist of the Hila's free arm rushing towards him a second time. He began to recoil, loosening his grip in the process. But the blow never fell. Instead, the Hila pulled back his arm and started to move it back around towards the front of his body.

Too slow: Called Redback's spear took him in the throat a moment later. And he died. Called 83 released his grip. Then he hung in the air, too weak to steady his body against the nearby vines. A sob escaped his lips. He shot a look at Called Redback, his fingers burning in shame. Called Redback simply dipped his head and beckoned to him. Taking a steadying breath, he braced his body against one of the vines, pulled his stabbing spear free from the dead Hila's back, and then he followed Called Redback onwards towards the heart of the nexus.

The Far-Beyonders greatly outnumbered the Hila, but the garden-builders had typed the Hila for war; they were taller, stronger, more agile, and possessed a greater reach. Far-Beyond bodies filled the air, twisting and tumbling like fallen leaves on the wind, scattering blood in every direction so that even the living were wet with it. The air was so foul with blood, sweat and excrement that it made Called 83 sick to the stomach just to draw breath; and he was so weak he could hardly grip his spear, or steady his arms and legs. But he kept moving, pulling himself along the travelling vines, keeping pace with Called Redback.

The Hila still controlled the ship. They still had the power to compel her to open fire – and it could not be long before their target would be in range.

The current ebbed suddenly, and the temperature of the mesotypes surrounding the berg began to drop once more, shaking Asha free of her reverie. She cursed and drew in her peripheral tropes, both decreasing her surface area and freeing up resources to devote to sparking a second exotherm. She took the further precaution of closing the reader so that she could put all her energy back into the more pressing task of finishing her diffraction measurements.

The temperature continued to fall, and soon Asha could feel her senses beginning to dull even in the heat given off by the exotherm. She had given over so much of her self to her reveries that she lost sight of the danger that she was in every moment that she was the wrong side of the brain/floe barrier.

"What is it?" demanded the Melzem.

A new target marker had appeared in the imaging tank, above and behind the wanderer. At the same time, a second subsidiary volume began to coalesce in the bottom of the tank. Wright didn't need to wait to see what this new close-up view would reveal. He had already realised what the approaching object must be.

He turned to the Melzem. "It's another farship." The urge to smile overcame him once more. "Don't you see? Elena Andalian didn't kill your people – the people chasing her did." He laughed. "She wasn't punishing your people because they hadn't helped her. The people chasing her were punishing them because they had."

Elena Andalian had approached the Melzemi outposts looking for information about the human race, and the people in the outposts had provided it. That was what had led Elena Andalian to the nebula, and the wanderer. Wright's heart was beating so fast that he had to struggle to draw breath.

The Melzem ordered the ship to re-align the catapult. And Wright finally awoke to what was about to happen. Gripping the vine, he spun back around and sought out the close-up view of the approaching farship in the imaging tank. Flashing, shifting glyphs clustered around the image of the farship. The next moment, the glyphs pulsed, the image flared; and a new alarm began to sound.

The second farship had opened fire.

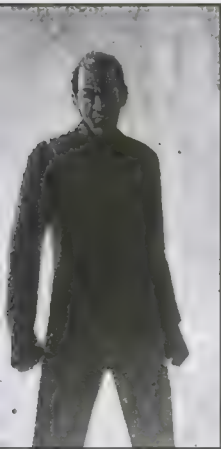
Every second that the current didn't flow, carrying heat from the core into the ice floes, the closer the ice in the floes came to forming a solid barrier. Asha fashioned a chemical marker and sprayed it across the surface of the berg; and then she peeled away and started for home.

Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and all the rest...she had abandoned her fellow XVIIers, because she saw nothing but death in staying with them, and she hadn't wanted to die. She still didn't. She jettisoned the diffraction measurements, streamlining her self, and tumbled through the tropes and floes towards the brain/floe barrier. The neo-nous could keep its secrets, and the Agora could keep its equity. Asha just wanted to hold on to life.

"Elena Called Andalian... Elena Called Andalian... If you are able, answer, please. We are...we are Beyonders – Far-Beyonders. I am he that you renamed 'Called 83 In Honour Of Another Of That Name'. After you left us, Elena Called Andalian, the Hila reappeared. They took this ship that you gave us and forced us to join them in their hunt for you. Elena Called Andalian...if you are able, answer, please... We are Far-Beyonders..."

The last of the Hila had died hard. And they had been able to fire the ship's missile-thrower at least once before the Far-Beyonders had finally been able to kill the last of them. So many dead Far-Beyonders floated about the fibre nexus that their corpses shut





out much of the light streaming in from the chamber walls, and so much blood tumbled through the air that it fell everywhere like rain.

Called 83 drew in a breath through gritted teeth then dipped his head towards the sounding box once more. "Elena Called Andalian... Elena Called And—"

"I am here, Far-Beyonders, I am here."

Called 83 hooted in relief. He felt a hand grip his shoulder and turned to find Called Red-back smiling down at him. Over Called Red-back's shoulder, he could see more survivors of the hunt, slick with blood – as were they all – but smiling. He dipped his head to them

then turned back to the sounding box.

"Elena Called Andalian, are you badly hurt? We have taken back our ship, but we were too late to prevent the Hila firing at –"

"It was not me that your missile struck, Far-Beyonders. It was the Melzemi farship."

"The Melzemi...?"

"You must go to it, Far-Beyonders. It is dying, and you must go to it. There is a being on board – not Melzem, not Hila; a human being. You must find him and bring him to me. I am sorry for the further hurt that I have brought upon your people, but I ask this of you. Do you understand, Far-Beyonders? Will you do this for me?"

The ice floes were starting to freeze into a single mass, squeezing out the intermixed mesotypes in the process. Asha shuffled through a thinning vein of compressed mesotypes, tumbling back towards the brain/floe barrier. For the moment, the heat from the exotherm was keeping her mind active, her tropes mobile and mobilising the mesotypes through which she was shuffling, but she knew that it couldn't last.

Elena Andalian, bane of the Melzemi, errant child of an abandoned garden. She wasn't what Wright had expected her to be. The children that had rescued him from the dying Melzemi farship had transported him in a shiftboat to the farship floating above the surface of the wanderer – that much he had been expecting. But once on board the farship, they had taken him not to its fibre nexus, but to one of its subsidiary chambers, a tubular space perhaps fifty metres in length and twenty metres across. It was a hangar. Lights furred its surfaces, but it contained no travelling vines. Instead, a ship all but filled its interior, a tear-shaped mass of bone and sinew, bristling with drive spines and sense organs. Viewed from some angles, the ship's surfaces seemed blue in colour; viewed from others, they appeared gold. She was breathtaking.

When she spoke, the sound seemed to rise up from every square centimetre of her surface. "Your 'wanderer' is a vessel of sorts," she said, "a container for an example of liquid-crystal intelligences that my informants called 'mesominds'. The mesominds are ancient, and they carry within them stored memories from a time when the galaxy was young.

"The stored memories of the mesominds are objects of such fascination for my informants that they send what they call 'miners' into the mesominds to copy as many of these stored memories as they can. But foreign bodies are poison to the mesominds. The only way that my informants have found to mine their memories is to mimic the make-up of the mesominds, stripping living beings of their

physical bodies and transforming their naked consciousnesses into short-range order in the twists and turns of packets of liquid crystals."

"And the miner in this vessel?"

"Is, according to my informants, human."

Asha spun her self out into a thread and pressed forward, one mesotype at a time. Her exotherm was exhausted. The pressure exerted by the freezing ice floes was so great that it was affecting the mesogenic properties of the substance of the *nous*. She flashed in and out of being – it felt as though she were living from one second to the second after next – and there was something beating at her, running through her, a pulse the meaning of which she couldn't grasp.

Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and all the rest... Asha had jettisoned the data that she had gathered in the *neo-nous* back-up memory store, but she had not journeyed in vain. Even if this was the final end, she had not journeyed in vain. She hadn't thought about Yari, Sakaro, Elizabet and all the rest for she didn't know how long. She had been right to choose life over staying with them, but she had been wrong to forget them. They were part of her self. She had carried the memory of them with her into the *nous*. She had been wrong not to acknowledge how much she needed to remember them.

She strained to keep moving. That pulse kept beating at her, rippling through her. It was the call of her VLF receiver, she realised in one of her increasingly brief moments of being. Someone was trying to contact her. But her receiver was the other side of the brain/floe barrier, and the barrier was still a long way away.

The VLF call rippled through her once more.

"Who are you, Elena Andalian? What is the human race to you?"

Called 83 studied the Melzemi human. There was something of the Hila about it, in the way that it moved and talked, for all that it was physically a much smaller being. Called 83 didn't know how to react to it. It was clearly important to Elena Called Andalian, but, like the Hila, it was a creature of the Melzemi. What poison had they written into its being?

"You say that the Melzemi re-grew you?" said Elena Called Andalian.

"Yes," answered the Melzemi human.

"My parents were just like you."

"I can see that you are a chil—"

"No, you don't understand: my parents were garden-grown humans, just like you. Their names were 'Grigor Petrovitch Rahmatov' and 'Nina Petrovna Seremnova'. The Stro grew them from patterns recovered from the ashes of the human homeworld."

The Melzemi human's mouth opened and closed but no sounds came out. Then, finally, the Melzemi human managed to say, "How... How many patterns did the Stro recover?"

"Enough to grow enough replacement humans to fill a ship five times the size of the ship that brought you here – a ship that the replacement humans named the *Acheron*. But the *Acheron* was no farship, it was a hollow rock powered by the most basic of drive systems. There is a limit to the Stro's generosity, even in circumstances such as these."

"But it was their fault," the Melzemi human said. "The Melzemi were targeting the Stro fleet grazing in the atmosphere of Jupiter when they detonated a bomb inside Sol."

"And that moved the Stro Commons to do as much as it did. But, they are a mercantile people, and there was no profit in it. It was not a venture that they were willing to sustain. Instead, they sold the



*Acheron* humans a list of gardens – abandoned gardens – offering them the chance to find a means of making their own way in the galaxy.”

“The farships,” put in the Melzemi human. “The *Acheron* might not be capable of faster-than-light travel, but the farships are. But, if *Acheron* humans grew these two farships from seeds that they found in an abandoned garden, why are there no *Acheron* humans here? I don’t understand.”

“The farships are the children of an abandoned garden – as are the Far-Beyonders. The garden was on the list that the Stro sold to the *Acheron* humans, but it was also very close to Melzem Space – too close to risk sending an expedition to it; but the leaders of the *Acheron* humans sent one anyway, an expedition led by my parents. And that decision got my parents killed.

“The Melzemi knew about the *Acheron* humans and the list that the Stro had sold them. They seeded all the abandoned gardens closest to the *Acheron*’s known course with Hila – Hila hardwired with instructions to hunt down and kill anything that entered the gardens.

“My parents grew me from a copy of the boneship expression carried by the expedition in case it had need of a lifeboat. They gave me life and cared for me while I was a neonate. They loved me. The Hila took them from me, but it was the leaders of the *Acheron* humans that delivered them into the Hila’s hands.”

“Was that why you didn’t take the farships back to the *Acheron* – because you blamed the leaders of the *Acheron* humans for what happened to your parents?”

“The leaders of the *Acheron* humans put the chance to profit from finding the FTL expression above any danger that my parents and the other members of their expedition might face. I wasn’t going to reward them for that. Instead...across the long years that it took the expedition to reach the target world, my parents had told me all sorts of stories, including the story of what had happened to their people. But they had also told me that they didn’t believe that the *Acheron* humans were all that was left of the human race. They had told me that, once they had the FTL expression, they wanted more than anything to search for other remnants of the human race.

“So, I chose to follow the course that my parents would have followed, had they lived. I collected the single farship seed that we had found and triggered it. Then I watched it grow into, not one, but two farships – twin farships. That was unexpected, but it gave me the chance to repay a debt that I owed the Beyonders on my parents’ behalf. My parents had co-opted a Beyonders group into taking them into the garden, and, because of that, those Beyonders had died along with them. So, I took one of the nascent farships for myself, and left the other for the Beyonders, to give them the means to go somewhere where no one could co-opt them ever again.

“I see now that it was stupid of me not to realise that the Hila would intervene again – that they would go to any length to pursue their command set.”

Hearing that, Called 83 whistled in protest, but before he could tell Elena Called Andalian that the blame was not hers, an alarm sounded in the chamber.

They had received a reply from the vessel below them at last.

“This...this is Asha Kafabusa, mesophrast agent of the *Agora*. This mesogenic lifeform is protected by treaty. If...if you choose to approach, do so in peace. I repeat: this is Asha – ”

The air had turned luminous, and there was a line of fire running along the horizon. A new day was beginning.

“For a long time I thought that I was the finish of the human race. But I was wrong. The definition of what it meant to be ‘human’ was shifting – expanding – and had been ever since the Melzemi blew up Earth’s sun. Finding Elena taught me that. And finding Asha put us both on the road to new horizons. It had been nearly 300 base-years since Asha had separated from the few other remaining XVIIers, but she was still alive. I was re-grown. You – the *Acheron* humans – were abroad in the galaxy. So, who was to say that her former friends weren’t also still alive somewhere, in some form?”

While Wright had been speaking, Antonov had been running a search. “There’s nothing in the Stro records about there being survivors from the Melzemi viral attack on the Pridac XVII colony. Nor is there anything that matches your descriptions of the ‘schools’ or the ‘*Agora*.’”

Wright rippled his fingers. “The Stro don’t know everything. Else, why would you be here, interrogating me?”

Antonov had no answer to that. He tried a different tack. “Were you with Elena Andalian when she crossed into Stro Space?”

Wright dipped his head. “We all were – Asha, the Far-Beyonder Called 83 and me. We were still with her when the Stro recalled the *Acheron* humans, and had you try to get her to hand over the farship.”

“Was it you who blocked our attempts to activate her command set?”

“Elena knew that you could co-opt her, just as her parents had co-opted the Beyonders. She was the child of a garden, and you knew the right verbal formula to get her to do whatever you wanted her to do. So, at her insistence, we kept her under sedation the whole time we were in range of your comms.”

It was a plausible enough story – it fit the facts – but it also raised more questions. “We lost contact with Elena Andalian near Sef’s Spike,” Antonov said. “Half a galaxy from here.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“But, if you were with her then, why are you here, now? You said that they opened the reservation archives to you 80 base-years ago. The Melzemi were still here, then. If your story is true, how then did you come to be a captive of the Melzemi again?”

“I never stopped being a captive of the Melzemi, Merchant-officer Antonov. Up here.” He tapped the side of his head. “I’m garden-grown too, just like Elena, just like the Far-Beyonders. And you, too, Merchant-officer Antonov.”

“There were no command sets written into the expressions that the Stro used to build the *Acheron* humans.”

Wright rippled his fingers. “That may be so.”

“It is so.”

Wright dipped his head. “The point is there was one written into the expression used to build me. And it was only here that it could be remo-” He started to cough suddenly.

“We can stop for a while,” said Antonov. A break would allow Antonov to collate the data that he already had. And he felt confident enough about the data that he had to be able to send a preliminary verdict back to Zhukhova-Antonov. He looked back towards the reservation, searching for signs of life. “What time do they serve breakfast around here?”

Wright laughed. “Around here, we get our own breakfasts.”

“Then shall we?”

Wright dipped his head. And the two men began to pick their way back across the grasslands towards the reservation. ♣

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Jamie Barras recently had a story published in the first issue of our sister magazine *Black Static* and a few more here in *Interzone*, including ‘The Beekeeper’ which made it on to *Locus Magazine*’s recommended reading list. Jamie lives in London.







Howie tracks me down over the Internet.

Man, I hadn't even thought about the guy in maybe fifteen years. I guess I wanted to forget him. Last time I saw him he was standing over me, fists clenched, face twisted in fury. He knocked me flying, even though he was scarcely half my size. Can't say I blame him.

When his email turns up in my inbox, I almost spam it, but then my mind holds up one of those little red flags, and I pause, cursor hovering over SPAM.

Howard Hawkins. Double-H. Fuck.

I pull my car into the car park in the middle of the afternoon. It's a Saturday, a couple of weeks later. There's only one other car there, a battered blue Volvo with its back bumper hanging half off. There's no one in it, but it isn't a Howie car. Howie would have something low and black and fast. Maybe it would be dented and a little old, but it would be hot. Nothing about this car says Howie. So I sit there, staring out over the estuary to the wading birds on the silver-streaked mud, enjoying the peace, waiting.

When I forgot Howie, I forgot this place too. I reckon if I just drove past, I wouldn't recognise it.

They've paved the lane, flattening out the narrow, potholed track and replacing it with sleek asphalt. They've put in this whole damned car park, complete with information board and little padlocked iron donation box. Progress. It makes the whole place feel tired rather than fresh. Or perhaps that's just me. I'm not nineteen anymore, and everything seems old.

I'd brought a map, but in the end, despite it being twenty years since I was here, I hadn't needed it. Yeah, I'd forgotten it, but Howie's email had brought it surging back like a tidal bore.

I put the steering wheel lock on – you can't be too careful, even out here – then lever myself out the driver's seat. We aren't due to meet for almost half an hour. Might as well take a look around. See the old sights.

School books sprawl over the back seat of the Volvo. Dozens of them. Definitely not Howie. Howie would be – what? My brain suddenly can't come up with what Howie might do for a job. The whole idea of Howie working nine-to-five just doesn't fit in the space in my head that Howie occupies.

The pub's still there, but it isn't The Saracen's Head anymore. It's something called a Hungry Horse, whatever the fuck that is, complete with a new glass-walled extension containing colourful plastic structures and screaming kids. The peeling paint, cracked brickwork, and smoke-stained windows have been facelifted away. I walk past it, onto the towpath between the canal and the estuary.

Half a mile seems longer than it used to. I've been meaning to get down the gym more often, but this last year things have been too busy, and anyway, there always seems to be something else to do. At my age, everyone gets a few extra pounds, don't they? A couple of beers at lunchtime and a couple after work every day. They soon add up, even if you don't eat that much. But what can you do? It goes with the job, just like the fags. My fingers are itching for one again. I pull the box (crushed) out of my back pocket and work one free. I let the wreath of stained smoke slip into the warm air.

At first I think I've remembered it wrong. Around the bend, past the first of the concrete boats dragged up onto the bank to act as makeshift breakwaters. I was sure I would find the windmill there. Isn't that what we've come to see, after all? The scene of most of our triumphs and a fair few of our disasters? That damned windmill.

But it's not there. There's just a strip of grass, stretching to the bushes and heaped wild roses on the edge of the mud beach. And standing there, a small, middle-aged woman.

Her black hair is cut short and peppered with grey. She wears a thin, too-old jacket. Smoke rises like an emaciated, pale finger from her cigarette. Some people smoke with style and some smoke comfortably. I'm one of the latter. This woman is the former, in spades. I take a step forward.

"Sophie?" She glances back. Her face is narrower than I remember, like it's been drawn back by a pinching hand, and slightly yellower. "Howie contacted you too?" I ask, then realise it's a stupid question. Of course he has.

"All of us," she said.

"Fuck."

"It's gone," she says.

I step up beside her.

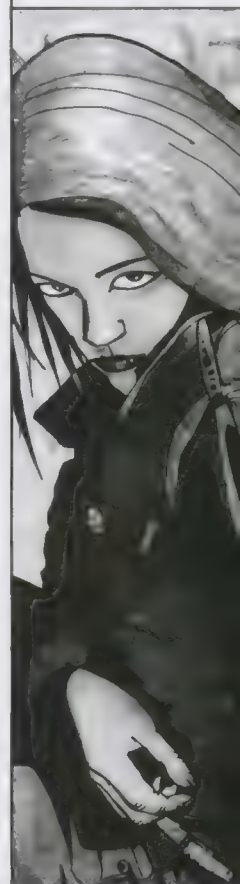
"Look," she says, pointing with her chin at the grass. "You can't even see where it used to be."

She's right. The grass is unmarked. I feel a hollow bubble press against the inside of my ribs then burst. The vacuum it leaves is shockingly painful. I force myself to ignore it.

"Twenty years," I say. "Things change."

She shakes her head.

Even back then, the windmill was old. Its sails were rotting ribs, stripped of the canvas that





once drove them. In the wind, it sometimes creaked like an old man. There were cracks in the walls, and the dust and bird shit were thick on the wooden floors. But it still looked like it would last forever. Everything looks like that when you're just a kid.

"Do you remember?" Sophie says. "Up there on the top floor, in the old straw? We fucked like rabbits."

"Sophie!" I'm obscurely shocked that this forty-year-old woman would say fuck. Back then, she wouldn't have dreamed of it. Back then, I probably said it every other word, and she was the one constantly shocked.

"It's true," she says. "I'd only slept with a couple of other guys before you, but you didn't let that slow you down. You fucked my brains out anyway."

"You told me I was your first," I say. Shit. Now I sound like an offended teenager.

She shrugs again. "It's a good line. Doesn't really work after you pass thirty, though."

I look around, desperately looking for something more normal to say. Seeing that cynicism in Sophie is like looking into an all-too-clear mirror and not liking what you see. "So," I say. "Got any kids?"

"I've got thirty different kids every hour, six hours a day," she says. "You want me to take some of them home?"

Something clicks in my mind. The Volvo. "You're a teacher?"

"Yeah. Gold star."

"How about husband? Boyfriend?"

"Men are bastards."

"Right."

She blows out a cloud of smoke, then drops her cigarette and grinds it out under her heel. "Fancy a drink?"

"For old time's sake?" I say, not able to stop the grin spreading on my face.

"No. It's just a drink."

I glance at my watch. "What about meeting Howard?"

"Fuck Howard," she says.

I'm halfway down my second pint of Guinness when Howie finally finds us. I don't know what I'm expecting, but it's not this. Balding, frown lines, small, university-lecturer glasses. This isn't die-young Howie. This isn't the wild kid who almost got me killed half-a-dozen times. I just stare at him, unable to say anything.

Howie doesn't have the same problem. "Where were you? I said the car park."

"Hi, Howie," I say. "Good to see you too."

Trailing in behind Howie, a slight look of distaste squeezing her mouth, comes Trish. Of all of us, she is the only one who seems not to have changed. Yeah, I can tell she's nearly forty, but she hasn't *changed*, not past a few wrinkles at her eyes and skin that looks tired.

The wildness in Howie's eyes subsides slightly. "What? Yeah. Hi." He shakes his head.

I squint at Howie and Trish standing there above our table, then I let out an incredulous laugh. "You married her, didn't you? Even after she and I -"

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?" Sophie drawls. Probably just in time too. Howie had a mean punch back then, and he looks like he's about ready to swing at me again. I drain the end of my Guinness, feeling the black liquid slide thickly down.

"I'm going to get a drink," Howie mutters.

"Mine's a whiskey," I say. "Double."

That's what we always had here, back when.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Trish says, eyeing the glasses in front of me.

I snort. "I've hardly started." God knows, it was a bad idea agree-

ing to meet. But I was curious. I relax back in my chair and let my eyelids droop closed.

I remember lying there in the old windmill, Sophie half-draped over me, naked, while dragonflies darted through the air above us like little shards of rainbow. There were hundreds of dragonflies that summer, a whole damned Biblical plague of them. Sophie had some kind of whacked out theory about the dragonflies, didn't she? I don't remember what it was. I'm not sure I ever knew. I was more interested in Sophie's body than her ideas. That and getting Trish out of Howie's bed and into mine. I feel a grin spreading on my face.

Howie smacks my drink down in front of me. "Something funny, Paul?"

I straighten. "Nah." I pick up the glass. A single. Tight-fisted bastard. I toss it down while he and Trish draw up seats. "So what's this about?" I say.

"Old times," Howie mutters.

"The windmill's gone, you know," I say.

"We know," Trish says. "We came down here a couple of weeks back."

Right before Howie contacted me.

"That's what it's about?"

Trish shakes her head.

"Then what? You're not going to pretend either of you wanted to see me again."

"I've been having dreams," Howie says, not looking up. "Bad dreams."

"So see a psychiatrist," Sophie says, lighting up another cigarette.

"Don't be a bitch, Sophie," Trish says.

This isn't working out the way it's supposed to. These people were my friends - my best friends, for those three summer months. When you meet up with old friends, it's supposed to be all hugs and laughs and reminiscences and the occasional awkward silence. Not venom that could paralyse a cobra.

"Dreams about what?" I say.

"Us. This."

I shake my head. "Howard, it was a long time ago. We've moved on. All of us." I look around at them. None of them answer.

Haven't we? I certainly haven't been dwelling on the bust-up for twenty years. I don't even really remember it. So Howie caught me in bed with Trish twenty years ago? Big deal. We were young.

We sit in silence for a minute or two. I turn my empty glass in my fingers, wondering if I should get another. A pleasant numbness is sinking into my legs. If I wasn't driving, I'd be at it like a shot. As it is, I've probably drunk far too much to drive on already.

A barmaid - can you still be a barmaid at seventy? - makes her way over and starts clearing the empties.

"You from around here?" I ask her, tired of sitting in this silence.

"All my life, love," she says. She gives me a look like she thinks I'm flirting with her. I ignore it. Saturdays aren't my flirting-with-pensioners days.

"That old windmill?" I ask. "What happened to it? When did they pull it down?"

She frowns. "Windmill?"

"You know. Down the towpath. Maybe half a mile. Right on the edge of the estuary."

She shakes her head. "Not around here, love. Never was. You must be thinking about somewhere else." Now she thinks I'm drunk.

"There really was," I say, feeling my neck turning slightly red.

She gives the table a perfunctory wipe, spreading around more dirt than she wipes off. "Not here."

I watch her toddle off. "Daft old bat," I mutter. I wish I'd got that other drink.



"She's right, Paul," Trish says. "When we came down here and found it gone, we asked around. No one had ever heard of it. We even checked out the old maps and borough plans. There's never been a windmill around here."

"I fucking know there was," I say, my voice rising too high. If this is some kind of game, I'm not finding it funny.

We went to the windmill a couple of dozen times that summer, all four of us, or just me and Sophie (and me and Trish, that one glorious time, just before the end). I can almost smell the dust and crumbling brickwork, hear the creaking sails, see the dragonflies.

I subside. The other three are looking at me, not saying a thing.

I blow out a heavy breath, pick up my glass, realise it's empty and replace it. "What?" I say.

"What exactly *do* you remember about that summer?" Trish asks me.

I feel that stupid, drunk, juvenile grin start on my face again, and I force it away. That isn't what she's asking about. Which is more the pity, because she still looks pretty hot, even after all these years.

After another drink, we left the pub and now we're walking along the tow path towards the windmill. It feels like old times. Except that now there is no windmill, and there never has been. So where the hell does that leave those old times?

What do I remember? I remember Howie running along the edge of the beach, long hair and leather jacket flapping wildly in the wind. Sophie in one of her skimpy little outfits, legs drawn up, showing pretty much everything. Trish standing watching the rest of us, all class and style and carefully-designed distance, a sardonic grin never far from her perfect lips. Piles of empty beer cans. Laughter. Smoke rising from our fire against the purple evening sky.

"The windmill," I say. "I remember every last inch of it. Every crack and corner. I remember the way the sails creaked and groaned. I remember which of the steps up to the top storey were rotten. I remember the old millstone with that split across one side. I remember that damned grinding pattern cut into it." The others are nodding, and I can tell they're seeing it too. "I remember those half-rotten sacks in one corner, and the almost-gone paint, and the view out over the estuary from the top." I look at the rest of them. "So does someone want to tell me how the hell it was never there?"

"Anything else?" Howie says.

"Yeah," I say. "The dragonflies. I always thought they'd be brittle if I touched them. They looked brittle. They looked like flakes of glass. But one landed on me once and it felt soft." I shake my head. "I never figured out where so many of them could have come from."

"The estuary," Sophie says. "They came up with the tide."

She's staring ahead, not really looking at anything.

"That doesn't make any sense," I say.

She shrugs, blows out smoke.

We were all at the end of our second year at university that summer. I was taking physics – something I've managed to avoid since, thank God – and I should have been revising, but summer had arrived gloriously early, so I was lying out by the lake sunbathing instead. I'd met Howie a couple of times before at Rock Soc events, so when he came wandering out with two gorgeous girls, I didn't hesitate to go over and say hi.

"We should go somewhere," Trish said, that life-kissed afternoon.

"Where?" I said.

"Anywhere."

So we did, and that was how we found the windmill. That same night, Sophie took me to bed, and the next three months were the best of my life, and then it ended as suddenly as a thunderclap.

"Tell me about the dreams," I say.

Howie hunches his shoulders uncomfortably. The air is descending into evening chill. We've tried to build a fire – old times, old times. It hasn't really worked, and there's no windmill to retreat into. But the sky is that familiar purple, and no one has suggested leaving.

"Go on, sweetheart," Trish says, surprisingly gentle. "It's why we're here."

Howie nods, but he doesn't look at me or Sophie. Maybe we aren't exactly what he was expecting either.

"We're here," Howie says. "Not now, but back then. Right near the beginning when we'd only just all got together." He glances at me, then away. "Back when we were two couples, you know? We're sitting on the beach in the late sunlight. There's beers and a bottle of cheap wine. We're talking about something. I don't know what. Something. And behind us I can feel the windmill, looming over us like some black storm." He stops, and sits in silence.

"That's it?" I say.

He shrugs. "Yeah."

"Fuck it, Howie. You dragged us out here for that?"

He shrugs again.

"Jeez."

Howie drops his head, and in that motion I recognise the old Howie for the first time today, recognise him as clearly as if it was yesterday. And I know he's lying.

"How long have you been having these dreams?" I ask.

"Years," he says. "On and off. Sometimes more often, sometimes less."

"And now?"

"More. Much more."

He removes his little glasses and squeezes his knuckles into his eyes. "I'm not sleeping much. Not well." He lifts his head again. "Am I the only one? Doesn't anyone else dream about...about all that?"

The silence is broken only by the cry of a bird swooping low over the estuary, its silhouette sharp against the silver mud, and the dispirited crackle of our failing fire. Then Sophie flicks away the glowing butt of her cigarette, pulls another from its packet and lights it with a match. She breathes in deeply. "I do," she says.

I blink at her. "You?"

"Yeah. Why not?" Smoke drifts from her nostrils, up past her eyes. "It's like Howie said. We're on the beach, just about where we're sitting now, and I can feel the windmill behind us. So I get up and walk towards it. The last of the evening light is catching on the top sails. I walk up to the windmill, and it seems to be leaning over me, as though it's a giant face peering down at me. I reach the steps and start up them, and just as I get to the door, I find myself wondering: Where have all the dragonflies gone? And then I wake."

She's telling more than Howie, but I can't shake the feeling that Sophie isn't letting on completely either.

The rest of them look at me.

I shake my head. "Not me. No dreams here."

"Trish?" Sophie said.

"No. Sorry."

"Why the hell is it just us?" Howie demands.

A look flashes between him and Sophie, and my eyes narrow. What did that mean? No one says anything. The last flame flickering in our fire dies, leaving a weak collection of dulling embers.

"We should go," Trish says.

"Where?" I say.

"Back to the pub. It's late."

We kick dirt over the almost-dead fire and pick up our beer cans. Behind me, I think I hear a tired creak, like the sails of the windmill, but when I turn, there's nothing.



Howie has booked us all rooms in a bed and breakfast not more than a mile away. Hasn't bothered to ask, of course, just assumed. But, folks, I'm so hammered by then, I couldn't have got my keys in the ignition let alone driven. We have dinner in the pub – fake Thai food, all chillies and not much else in the way of flavours, washed down with more beer than was strictly necessary – then Howie drives us to the B&B. Trish and Howie head off to their room as soon as we got in, leaving me and Sophie alone in the corridor.

"You're a teacher now, right?" I say, even though she told me so earlier. I'm slurring my words and noticing it.

"Yeah."

I pause. "I work in finance." *In finance.* That's not a job. It's a fucking abstract. The phrase has never sounded so empty to me.

Sophie agrees. "Fuck, Paul," she says. "You used to have dreams."

That hurts. If you've never had someone take a look at your life and then kick it away like a kid with a sandcastle then you don't know how much. "Thanks," I say.

She fumbles in her shoulder bag for another cigarette.

"You smoke too much," I say.

"Fuck off," she mumbles around the cigarette.

The corridor is dim, the wallpaper is seventies-patterned and textured, worn thin by a thousand brushing shoulders. The wall is hung with the kind of prints of horses you only see in cheap little guesthouses like this one. The whole thing depresses me.

I indicate the door to my room with a nod of my head. "Do you want to...?"

"Fuck, no." She must see the spasm of pain on my face, because she lays a hand briefly on my arm. "I've learnt one thing in these twenty years," she says. "You can't go back. Ever. There are gates you walk through, and they close behind you. You can't storm them, you can't break through. You just have to keep going forward, wherever it leads you."

Then she unlocks her room and leaves me standing in the corridor. The last of us. Again.

My room has a view out over the estuary. When I can't sleep, I stand there and watch the dark river slip by beneath the bright moonlight.

*You can never go back.*

I never wanted to. Until now, and all the doors are shut behind me.

The river slips by. It never turns back. Until the tide rolls in.

The beginning and the end. One at the start of that summer, the other at its finish. The days could have been swapped around with little change. Bright blue skies. A furnace of a sun. The canal choked with reeds and rushes. Birdsong in the trees and bushes. Sophie slipping her hand into mine.

No. That last bit only happened on the first day we were all together, not the last. That was a difference.

She slipped her hand into mine, and I was so startled I almost stumbled. Startled and heart-stoppingly delighted. Dragonflies hovered in and out of the rushes and reeds in the canal and over the towpath. I gave Sophie an astonished look. She winked at me and kick-started my heart again. I remember I found walking difficult that afternoon.

Howie looped his arm over Trish's shoulders (that didn't happen on the last day either – all those signs of the coming storm, and not one of us stupid kids realised).

We were all laughing at some crap joke when we came around the corner and saw the windmill for the first time, bulking incongruously from an expanse of grass between the canal and the estuary.

I had a good time at University. Okay, the lectures were mind-numbing, and the labs seemed to stretch on forever. But that was

only the days – the mornings, mostly – and the rest of the time was mine. There were some bad moments, too, of course – some storming hangovers; being dumped at a party with half my friends watching – but it was a good time on balance.

On that first day with Sophie, Trish, and Howie, it seemed to take a step up. The sun seemed brighter, the colours more vivid, the sounds sharper and clearer. As though we'd opened a door in the clouded glass that had always separated us from the truth of the world.

Later, on that last day, when it all turned to ash, it was as though we stepped back out that door and shut it behind us.

I think Sophie must have seen the windmill first, because I heard her shout, "It's perfect," and then we all saw it, looming above us.

Pulling me along by the hand, Sophie raced towards it. Moments later, I heard Trish and Howie come chasing after. We all clattered up the steps, burst into the windmill, and stopped. The space was still, eerie. Light filtered in strands through cracks in the brickwork and between shutters. The windmill seemed to hold the ghost of an indrawn breath. A word struck me at that moment: potential. Not potential as in the mundane sense of this-could-be-renovated-into-some-yuppie-apartment-full-of-chrome-and-spotlights potential, but potential as in the physics I was half-heartedly studying. This place seemed to exist at a higher state of energy. An electrical potential difference drives a current around a circuit. This place seemed poised to drive...something through us. Enliven and quicken us. Power us.

"Yow!" Howie screamed, and a faint echo bounced back.

We laughed, and tumbled together into the potential.

I sleep eventually. Most nights I don't sleep well, and tonight is no exception. I don't dream about the windmill, even though I'm half expecting to. Instead, I dream of the slow river flowing on through the estuary to the sea. It's not a restful dream, and sometime in the night I awake to find tears streaming down my cheeks. I'm sobbing.

I left my soul in 1987. I left my heart and my love and my dreams, and I want them back. I want them back.

My tears taste of salt and whiskey.

Normally, I sleep badly – hangover sleep – but I'm hard to wake in the morning. I have two alarms, one by my bed and the other across the room, staggered by a couple of minutes. Most days it's enough. When it's not, I skip breakfast. This morning, it's different. I'm awake and up by six, pacing my bedroom. It's cramped and claustrophobic, even when I throw the window open and let the cold dawn air in, but breakfast isn't until seven, and there's nowhere else to go. I wonder what I'm doing here. "These people aren't the people I knew when I was at University, and remembering what they were – what I was – leaves me empty. There was potential, then, and now it's gone. The people we were are gone. Sophie was right. You can't walk back through those gates."

Suddenly it's too much. I don't want to see Howie or Trish or Sophie anymore. I don't want to stare back at the past and see a future that should have been but never was. I thump out of the room, downstairs, and out the front door. My car is still parked where I left it the day before, but that's only a mile or so away. I start to walk. I'm light-headed from lack of breakfast and dehydrated from drinking too much.

I intend to get straight into the car and head off, never look back, never see any of them again. I even slide myself in behind the steering wheel and fumble the key into the ignition. But then I sit there, staring out at the morning-painted river and silvery mud banks. We came here once in the early morning, Sophie and me. We snuck out of dorms while it was still dark, and Sophie drove. We bumped



the car over the potholes then pulled it off the track, against the brambles. In the dawn, the windmill was a silhouette against a pastel-blue sky. We hung around, smoked a bit, then tumbled, naked and chilly, under the old sacking. The dragonflies were already there.

Trish and Howie turned up before we were dressed. Howie looked away while we crawled out, laughing, and pulled our clothes on, but Trish kept looking, watching me get dressed, with that sardonic curl to her lip. That was the first time I reckoned I might have a real chance with her. I don't think Sophie noticed.

I decide to take one last look all on my own, before I leave all this behind forever. Maybe I'm hoping the windmill will be there.

It isn't. There's no sign it ever was. The grass is unmarked. There are no dragonflies.

I walk out to the edge of the mud banks and wait. I'm not sure what for.

"You're a bastard."

The sudden voice makes me turn. Howie is standing there behind me, his thin shoulders pulled up tight.

"Yeah," I say.

"It was your fault it went wrong," he says. "You and your fucking dick. So why the fuck aren't you the one haunted by it?"

I shrug. "Guess it never bothered me. Anyway," I glance at him, "she was a beast in bed. Why –"

I don't get time to finish. Howie might be scrawny, but he's still got that punch. He lashes out and catches me square on the jaw. I fall to the ground.

"She was my first girlfriend," he shouts. "My only girlfriend. I loved her."

My jaw hurts, and I'm lying in the mud. "You've still got her," I say.

He kicks me, hard, flipping me over. "It's not the same. It's never been the same." He kicks me again. I feel something crack.

"I'm sorry," I say. I don't know where it comes from.

He pauses, foot drawn back, staring down incredulously at me.

"I'm sorry," I repeat, and I mean it. I'm sorry for all of it.

Howie drops down beside me, sitting cross-legged in the wet mud, not seeming to notice it.

"I'm not going home with her," he says, quietly.

I force myself up onto an elbow. My rib grates agonisingly.

"Shit, man," I say. "I'm sorry."

That first day, we drove out here fast in Howie's battered old car. Howie had a new Whitesnake album. He played it over and over in the cassette deck and drove way too fast. He already knew all the words, and he belted them out, even though he couldn't sing a note. I was breathless with laughter.

The last day that we all came up together (just a few days before the very last time any of us were here), we drove in silence. It wasn't our worst day, but it was close. In truth it had been coming for a week. Trish and Howie were hardly talking. I was getting bored with Sophie. We drank a few cans, but no one said much, and we left before it was fully dark.

Two or three days later, I came out of my last exam – I'd failed it, I knew that; I'd known before I even went in – and Trish was standing there, opposite the exam hall, leaning on the wooden railing. Smoke drifted from a long cigarette. She levered herself off the railing, that sardonic, faintly-amused expression still settled on her face.

To be honest, the idea of getting Trish out of Howie's bed and into mine had palled in the last week. Maybe even then I knew it was over. Maybe that was why I walked up to her anyway and took her face in my hands. I kissed her hard, tasting the tobacco on her lips and tongue, breathing it in from her hair.

"The windmill," I said.

She writhed briefly against me, then stepped back with a laugh. "The windmill. Always the windmill."

And that's where Howie and Sophie found us, four hours later.

The sound of a footfall behind us makes me look back. Sophie and Trish are standing there together.

"The windmill," Trish says. "Always the fucking windmill."

And there's not much more to say. There is no windmill. There never has been. Call it hallucination or magic or collective delusion. It doesn't matter. We are all that there ever was. Our present defines our past as much as our past ever defines our present. If there was a windmill, once, a potential, then now there never was. It's over.

We stand together, for a while, all four of us, as though nothing has changed, looking out over the estuary. The tide has turned and is coming in. Water eddies into the channels cut in the mud. It swirls against the river flowing out. A small tidal bore, no more than a couple of inches of water, makes its way up the estuary and is gone. A single dragonfly darts by.

Slowly we trail away. First Sophie and Trish together, then Howie on his own, not looking up from the ground, his thin shoulders hunched, until I'm left standing there on my own.

It's almost a pain inside me, the regret. We could have done it. We could have done anything. But we didn't.

The air is full of dragonflies now. They've come in with the tide.

I turn and walk away, heading back towards my car.

Behind me, I hear the windmill creak. I smell the dust and old sacking and rotting wood. But I don't look around. We had our chance, and we blew it. There's no going back.

That night I dream of the windmill.

We're sitting on the thin strip of sand between the grass and the mud banks that lead down to the water. There's a small fire burning, more glowing coals than burning wood, and thin smoke rising into the still air. There are some empty cans on the ground, and an empty bottle. Howie is telling some wild, ridiculous story, and the rest of us are laughing. The air is thick and sticky, but, unusually, there are no dragonflies. The tide is on its way in, but there are no dragonflies.

I hear the creak of the windmill, and feel it lowering over us like a great, black storm. I turn, and there it is, as clear and real as it ever was. I walk towards it, climb up the steps, and then I wonder: Where are all the dragonflies?

I pull open the door.

My feet crunch on something. It sounds like very thin glass. I look down. The floor is covered in dead dragonflies. Under my shoes, they are brittle.

I press on. I walk around the cracked millstone to the wooden steps that lead, ladder-like, up to top level. I climb.

Up here, the dragonflies are thicker on the floor. They're almost ankle-deep. I kick through them, like through autumn leaves.

I see us lying there in the corner, Trish and me. Naked. Young.

"Was that all?" I want to scream. "Was that all that killed it?" A bit of stupid, physical, meaningless sex. It wasn't even that good.

I surge forward, angry, ready to pull us apart. To kick some sense into us, to tell us it wasn't worth it. To change the inevitable. But it's too late. The door is opening downstairs. Howie and Sophie are on their way up. ☼

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# crystal

GREG EGAN

1

"More caviar?" Daniel Cliff gestured at the serving dish and the cover irised from opaque to transparent. "It's fresh, I promise you. My chef had it flown in from Iran this morning."

"No thank you." Julie Dehghani touched a napkin to her lips then laid it on her plate with a gesture of finality. The dining room overlooked the Golden Gate bridge, and most people Daniel invited here were content to spend an hour or two simply enjoying the view, but he could see that she was growing impatient with his small talk.

Daniel said, "I'd like to show you something." He led her into the adjoining conference room. On the table was a wireless keyboard; the wall screen showed a Linux command line interface. "Take a seat," he suggested.

Julie complied. "If this is some kind of audition, you might have warned me," she said.

"Not at all," Daniel replied. "I'm not going to ask you to jump through any hoops. I'd just like you to tell me what you think of this machine's performance."

She frowned slightly, but she was willing to play along. She ran some standard benchmarks. Daniel saw her squinting at the screen, one hand almost reaching up to where a desktop display would be, so she could double-check the number of digits in the FLOPS rating by counting them off with one finger. There were a lot more than she'd been expecting, but she wasn't seeing double.

"That's extraordinary," she said. "Is this whole building packed with networked processors, with only the penthouse for humans?"

Daniel said, "You tell me. Is it a cluster?"

"Hmm." So much for not making her jump through hoops, but it wasn't really much of a challenge. She ran some different benchmarks, based on algorithms that were provably impossible to parallelise; however smart the compiler was, the steps these programs required would have to be carried out strictly in sequence.

The FLOPS rating was unchanged.

Julie said, "All right, it's a single processor. Now you've got my attention. Where is it?"

"Turn the keyboard over."

There was a charcoal-grey module, five centimetres square and five millimetres thick, plugged into an inset docking bay. Julie examined it, but it bore no manufacturer's logo or other identifying marks.

"This connects to the processor?" she asked.

"No. It is the processor."

"You're joking." She tugged it free of the dock, and the wall screen went blank. She held it up and turned it around, though Daniel wasn't sure what she was looking for. Somewhere to slip in a screwdriver and take the thing apart, probably. He said, "If you break it, you own it, so I hope you've got a few hundred spare."

"A few hundred grand? Hardly."

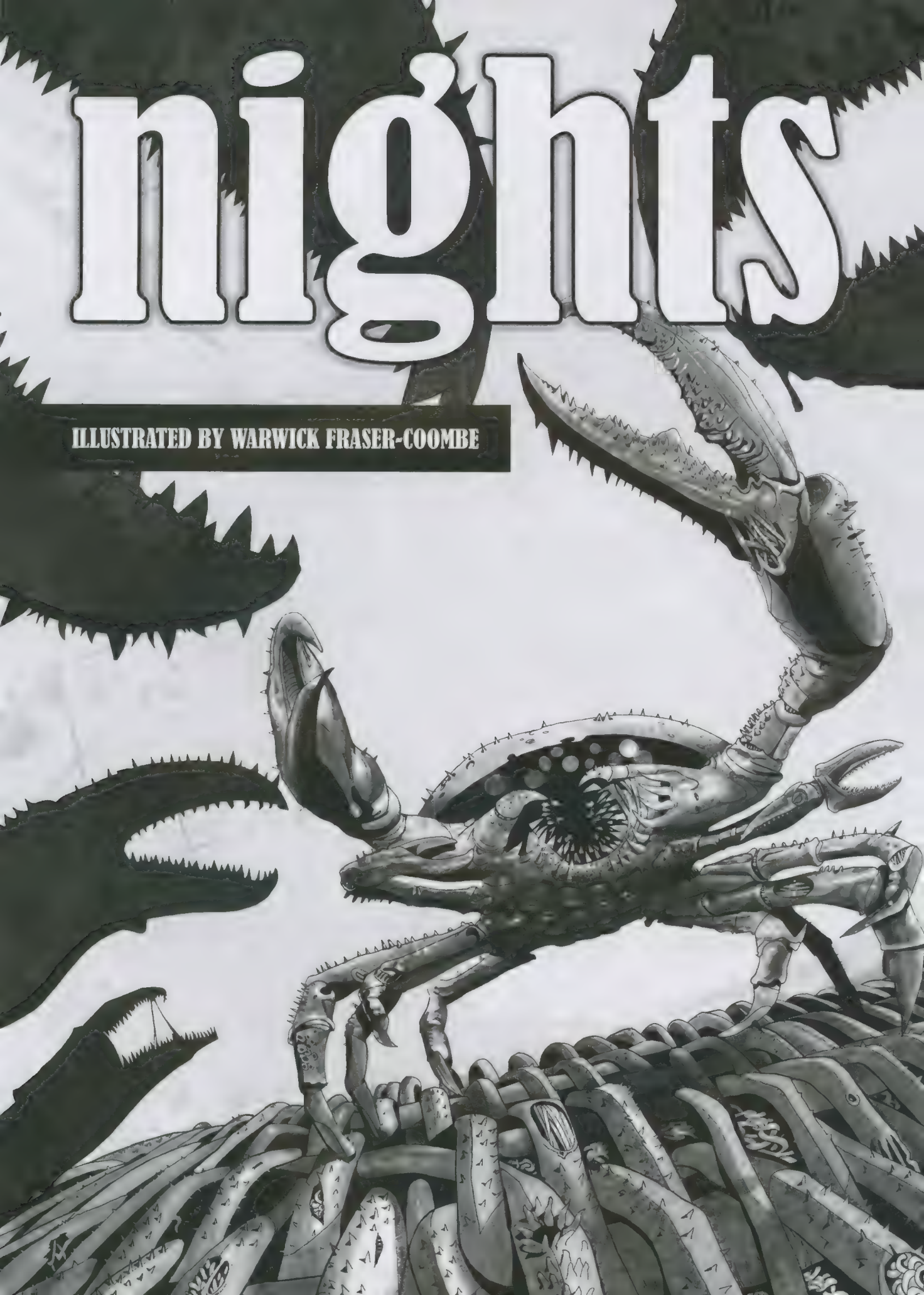
"A few hundred million."

Her face flushed. "Of course. If it was two hundred grand, everyone would have one." She put it down on the table, then as an afterthought slid it a little further from the edge. "As I said, you've got my attention."



# nights

ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE





Daniel smiled. "I'm sorry about the theatrics."

"No, this deserved the build-up. What is it, exactly?"

"A single, three-dimensional photonic crystal. No electronics to slow it down; every last component is optical. The architecture was nanofabricated with a method that I'd prefer not to describe in detail."

"Fair enough." She thought for a while. "I take it you don't expect me to buy one. My research budget for the next thousand years would barely cover it."

"In your present position. But you're not joined to the university at the hip."

"So this is a job interview?"

Daniel nodded.

Julie couldn't help herself; she picked up the crystal and examined it again, as if there might yet be some feature that a human eye could discern. "Can you give me a job description?"

"Midwife."

She laughed. "To what?"

"History," Daniel said.

Her smile faded slowly.

"I believe you're the best AI researcher of your generation," he said. "I want you to work for me." He reached over and took the crystal from her. "With this as your platform, imagine what you could do."

Julie said, "What exactly would you want me to do?"

"For the last fifteen years," Daniel said, "you've stated that the ultimate goal of your research is to create conscious, human-level, artificial intelligence."

"That's right."

"Then we want the same thing. What I want is for you to succeed."

She ran a hand over her face; whatever else she was thinking, there was no denying that she was tempted. "It's gratifying that you have so much confidence in my abilities," she said. "But we need to be clear about some things. This prototype is amazing, and if you ever get the production costs down I'm sure it will have some extraordinary applications. It would eat up climate forecasting, lattice QCD, astrophysical modelling, proteomics..."

"Of course." Actually, Daniel had no intention of marketing the device. He'd bought out the inventor of the fabrication process with his own private funds; there were no other shareholders or directors to dictate his use of the technology.

"But AI," Julie said, "is different. We're in a maze, not a highway; there's nowhere that speed alone can take us. However many exaflops I have to play with, they won't spontaneously combust into consciousness. I'm not being held back by the university's computers; I have access to SHARCNET anytime I need it. I'm being held back by my own lack of insight into the problems I'm addressing."

Daniel said, "A maze is not a dead end. When I was twelve, I wrote a program for solving mazes."

"And I'm sure it worked well," Julie replied, "for small, two-dimensional ones. But you know how those kind of algorithms scale. Put your old program on this crystal, and I could still design a maze in half a day that would bring it to its knees."

"Of course," Daniel conceded. "Which is precisely why I'm interested in hiring you. You know a great deal more about the maze of AI than I do; any strategy you developed would be vastly superior to a blind search."

"I'm not saying that I'm merely groping in the dark," she said. "If it was that bleak, I'd be working on a different problem entirely. But I don't see what difference this processor would make."

"What created the only example of consciousness we know of?" Daniel asked.

"Evolution."

"Exactly. But I don't want to wait three billion years, so I need to make the selection process a great deal more refined, and the sources of variation more targeted."

Julie digested this. "You want to try to *evolve* true AI? Conscious, human-level AI?"

"Yes." Daniel saw her mouth tightening, saw her struggling to measure her words before speaking.

"With respect, I don't think you've thought that through."

"On the contrary," Daniel assured her. "I've been planning this for twenty years."

"Evolution," she said, "is about failure and death. Do you have any idea how many sentient creatures lived and died along the way to *Homo sapiens*? How much suffering was involved?"

"Part of your job would be to minimise the suffering."

"Minimise it?" She seemed genuinely shocked, as if this proposal was even worse than blithely assuming that the process would raise no ethical concerns. "What right do we have to inflict it at all?"

Daniel said, "You're grateful to exist, aren't you? Notwithstanding the tribulations of your ancestors."

"I'm grateful to exist," she agreed, "but in the human case the suffering wasn't deliberately inflicted by anyone, and nor was there any alternative way we could have come into existence. If there really *had* been a just creator, I don't doubt that he would have followed Genesis literally; he sure as hell would not have used evolution."

"Just, and *omnipotent*," Daniel suggested. "Sadly, that second trait's even rarer than the first."

"I don't think it's going to take omnipotence to create something in our own image," she said. "Just a little more patience and self-knowledge."

"This won't be like natural selection," Daniel insisted. "Not that blind, not that cruel, not that wasteful. You'd be free to intervene as much as you wished, to take whatever palliative measures you felt appropriate."

"Palliative measures?" Julie met his gaze, and he saw her expression flicker from disbelief to something darker. She stood up and glanced at her wristphone. "I don't have any signal here. Would you mind calling me a taxi?"

Daniel said, "Please, hear me out. Give me ten more minutes, then the helicopter will take you to the airport."

"I'd prefer to make my own way home." She gave Daniel a look that made it clear that this was not negotiable.

He called her a taxi, and they walked to the elevator.

"I know you find this morally challenging," he said, "and I respect that. I wouldn't dream of hiring someone who thought these were trivial issues. But if I don't do this, someone else will. Someone with far worse intentions than mine."

"Really?" Her tone was openly sarcastic now. "So how, exactly, does the mere existence of your project stop this hypothetical bin Laden of AI from carrying out his own?"

Daniel was disappointed; he'd expected her at least to understand what was at stake. He said, "This is a race to decide between Godhood and enslavement. Whoever succeeds first will be unstoppable. I'm not going to be anyone's slave."

Julie stepped into the elevator; he followed her.

She said, "You know what they say the modern version of Pascal's Wager is? Sucking up to as many Transhumanists as possible, just in case one of them turns into God. Perhaps your motto should be 'Treat every chatterbot kindly, it might turn out to be the deity's uncle.'"

"We will be as kind as possible," Daniel said. "And don't forget, we can determine the nature of these beings. They will be happy to be



alive, and grateful to their creator. We can select for those traits.”

Julie said, “So you’re aiming for *übermenschen* that wag their tails when you scratch them behind the ears? You might find there’s a bit of a trade-off there.”

The elevator reached the lobby. Daniel said, “Think about this, don’t rush to a decision. You can call me any time.” There was no commercial flight back to Toronto tonight; she’d be stuck in a hotel, paying money she could ill-afford, thinking about the kind of salary she could demand from him now that she’d played hard to get. If she mentally recast all this obstinate moralising as a deliberate bargaining strategy, she’d have no trouble swallowing her pride.

Julie offered her hand, and he shook it. She said, “Thank you for dinner.”

The taxi was waiting. He walked with her across the lobby. “If you want to see AI in your lifetime,” he said, “this is the only way it’s going to happen.”

She turned to face him. “Maybe that’s true. We’ll see. But better to spend a thousand years and get it right, than a decade and succeed by your methods.”

As Daniel watched the taxi drive away into the fog, he forced himself to accept the reality: she was never going to change her mind. Julie Dehghani had been his first choice, his ideal collaborator. He couldn’t pretend that this wasn’t a setback.

Still, no one was irreplaceable. However much it would have delighted him to have won her over, there were many more names on his list.

## 2

Daniel’s wrist tingled as the message came through. He glanced down and saw the word **PROGRESS!** hovering in front of his watch face.

The board meeting was almost over; he disciplined himself and kept his attention focused for ten more minutes. WiddulHands.com had made him his first billion, and it was still the pre-eminent social networking site for the 0–3 age group. It had been fifteen years since he’d founded the company, and he had since diversified in many directions, but he had no intention of taking his hands off the levers.

When the meeting finished he blanked the wall screen and paced the empty conference room for half a minute, rolling his neck and stretching his shoulders. Then he said, “Lucien.”

Lucien Crace appeared on the screen. “Significant progress?” Daniel enquired.

“Absolutely.” Lucien was trying to maintain polite eye contact with Daniel, but something kept drawing his gaze away. Without waiting for an explanation, Daniel gestured at the screen and had it show him exactly what Lucien was seeing.

A barren, rocky landscape stretched to the horizon. Scattered across the rocks were dozens of crab-like creatures – some deep blue, some coral pink, though these weren’t colours the locals would see, just species markers added to the view to make it easier to interpret. As Daniel watched, fat droplets of corrosive rain drizzled down from a passing cloud. This had to be the bleakest environment in all of Sapphire.

Lucien was still visible in an inset. “See the blue ones over by the crater lake?” he said. He sketched a circle on the image to guide Daniel’s attention.

“Yeah.” Five blues were clustered around a lone pink; Daniel gestured and the view zoomed in on them. The blues had opened up their prisoner’s body, but it wasn’t dead; Daniel was sure of that, because the pinks had recently acquired a trait that turned their

bodies to mush the instant they expired.

“They’ve found a way to study it,” Lucien said. “To keep it alive and study it.”

From the very start of the project, he and Daniel had decided to grant the Phites the power to observe and manipulate their own bodies as much as possible. In the DNA world, the inner workings of anatomy and heredity had only become accessible once highly sophisticated technology had been invented. In Sapphire, the barriers were designed to be far lower. The basic units of biology here were ‘beads’, small spheres that possessed a handful of simple properties but no complex internal biochemistry. Beads were larger than the cells of the DNA world, and Sapphire’s diffractionless optics rendered them visible to the right kind of naked eye. Animals acquired beads from their diet, while in plants they replicated in the presence of sunlight, but unlike cells they did not themselves mutate. The beads in a Phite’s body could be rearranged with a minimum of fuss, enabling a kind of self-modification that no human surgeon or prosthetics engineer could rival – and this skill was actually essential for at least one stage in every Phite’s life: reproduction involved two Phites pooling their spare beads and then collaborating to ‘sculpt’ them into an infant, in part by directly copying each other’s current body plans.

Of course these crabs knew nothing of the abstract principles of engineering and design, but the benefits of trial and error, of self-experimentation and cross-species plagiarism, had led them into an escalating war of innovation. The pinks had been the first to stop their corpses from being plundered for secrets, by stumbling on a way to make them literally fall apart *in extremis*; now it seemed the blues had found a way around that, and were indulging in a spot of vivisection-as-industrial-espionage.

Daniel felt a visceral twinge of sympathy for the struggling pink, but he brushed it aside. Not only did he doubt that the Phites were any more conscious than ordinary crabs, they certainly had a radically different relationship to bodily integrity. The pink was resisting because its dissectors were of a different species; if they had been its cousins it might not have put up any fight at all. When something happened in spite of your wishes, that was unpleasant by definition, but it would be absurd to imagine that the pink was in the kind of agony that an antelope being flayed by jackals would feel – let alone experiencing the existential terrors of a human trapped and mutilated by a hostile tribe.

“This is going to give them a tremendous advantage,” Lucien enthused.

“The blues?”

Lucien shook his head. “Not blues over pinks; Phites over trade-life. Bacteria can swap genes, but this kind of active mimetics is unprecedented without cultural support. Da Vinci might have watched the birds in flight and sketched his gliders, but no lemur ever dissected the body of an eagle and then stole its tricks. They’re going to have *innate* skills as powerful as whole strands of human technology. All this before they even have language.”

“Hmm.” Daniel wanted to be optimistic too, but he was growing wary of Lucien’s hype. Lucien had a doctorate in genetic programming, but he’d made his name with FoodExcuses.com, a web service that trawled the medical literature to cobble together quasi-scientific justifications for indulging in your favourite culinary vice. He had the kind of technobabble that could bleed money out of venture capitalists down pat, and though Daniel admired that skill in its proper place, he expected a higher insight-to-bullshit ratio now that Lucien was on his payroll.

The blues were backing away from their captive. As Daniel watched, the pink sealed up its wounds and scuttled off towards a group



of its own kind. The blues had now seen the detailed anatomy of the respiratory system that had been giving the pinks an advantage in the thin air of this high plateau. A few of the blues would try it out, and if it worked for them, the whole tribe would copy it.

"So what do you think?" Lucien asked.

"Select them," Daniel said.

"Just the blues?"

"No, both of them." The blues alone might have diverged into competing subspecies eventually, but bringing their old rivals along for the ride would help to keep them sharp.

"Done," Lucien replied. In an instant, ten million Phites were erased, leaving the few thousand blues and pinks from these badlands to inherit the planet. Daniel felt no compunction; the extinction events he decreed were surely the most painless in history.

Now that the world no longer required human scrutiny, Lucien unthrottled the crystal and let the simulation race ahead; automated tools would let them know when the next interesting development arose. Daniel watched the population figures rising as his chosen species spread out and recolonised Sapphire.

Would their distant descendants rage against him, for this act of 'genocide' that had made room for them to flourish and prosper? That seemed unlikely. In any case, what choice did he have? He couldn't start manufacturing new crystals for every useless side-branch of the evolutionary tree. Nobody was wealthy enough to indulge in an exponentially growing number of virtual animal shelters, at half a billion dollars apiece.

He was a just creator, but he was not omnipotent. His careful pruning was the only way.

3

In the months that followed, progress came in fits and starts. Several times, Daniel found himself rewinding history, reversing his decisions and trying a new path. Keeping every Phite variant alive was impractical, but he did retain enough information to resurrect lost species at will.

The maze of AI was still a maze, but the speed of the crystal served them well. Barely eighteen months after the start of Project Sapphire, the Phites were exhibiting a basic theory of mind: their actions showed that they could deduce what others knew about the world, as distinct from what they knew themselves. Other AI researchers had spliced this kind of thing into their programs by hand, but Daniel was convinced that his version was better integrated, more robust. Human-crafted software was brittle and inflexible; his Phites had been forged in the heat of change.

Daniel kept a close watch on his competitors, but nothing he saw gave him reason to doubt his approach. Sunil Gupta was raking in the cash from a search engine that could 'understand' all forms of text, audio and video, making use of fuzzy logic techniques that were at least forty years old. Daniel respected Gupta's business acumen, but in the unlikely event that his software ever became conscious, the sheer cruelty of having forced it to wade through the endless tides of blogorrhoea would surely see it turn on its creator and exact a revenge that made *The Terminator* look like a picnic. Angela Lindstrom was having some success with her cheesy AfterLife, in which dying clients gave heart-to-heart interviews to software that then constructed avatars able to converse with surviving relatives. And Julie Deghani was still frittering away her talent, writing software for robots that played with coloured blocks side-by-side with human infants, and learnt languages from adult volunteers by imitating the interactions of baby talk. Her prophesy of taking a thousand years

to 'get it right' seemed to be on target.

As the second year of the project drew to a close, Lucien was contacting Daniel once or twice a month to announce a new breakthrough. By constructing environments that imposed suitable selection pressures, Lucien had generated a succession of new species that used simple tools, crafted crude shelters, and even domesticated plants. They were still shaped more or less like crabs, but they were at least as intelligent as chimpanzees.

The Phites worked together by observation and imitation, guiding and reprimanding each other with a limited repertoire of gestures and cries, but as yet they lacked anything that could truly be called a language. Daniel grew impatient; to move beyond a handful of specialised skills, his creatures needed the power to map any object, any action, any prospect they might encounter in the world into their speech, and into their thoughts.

Daniel summoned Lucien and they sought a way forward. It was easy to tweak the Phites' anatomy to grant them the ability to generate more subtle vocalisations, but that alone was no more useful than handing a chimp a conductor's baton. What was needed was a way to make sophisticated planning and communications skills a matter of survival.

Eventually, he and Lucien settled on a series of environmental modifications, providing opportunities for the creatures to rise to the occasion. Most of these scenarios began with famine. Lucien blighted the main food crops, then offered a palpable reward for progress by dangling some tempting new fruit from a branch that was just out of reach. Sometimes that metaphor could almost be taken literally: he'd introduce a plant with a complex life cycle that required tricky processing to render it edible, or a new prey animal that was clever and vicious, but nutritionally well worth hunting in the end.

Time and again, the Phites failed the test, with localised species dwindling to extinction. Daniel watched in dismay; he had not grown sentimental, but he'd always boasted to himself that he'd set his standards higher than the extravagant cruelties of nature. He contemplated tweaking the creatures' physiology so that starvation brought a swifter, more merciful demise, but Lucien pointed out that he'd be slashing his chances of success if he curtailed this period of intense motivation. Each time a group died out, a fresh batch of mutated cousins rose from the dust to take their place; without that intervention, Sapphire would have been a wilderness within a few real-time days.

Daniel closed his eyes to the carnage, and put his trust in sheer time, sheer numbers. In the end, that was what the crystal had bought him: when all else failed, he could give up any pretence of knowing how to achieve his aims and simply test one random mutation after another.

Months went by, sending hundreds of millions of tribes starving into their graves. But what choice did he have? If he fed these creatures milk and honey, they'd remain fat and stupid until the day he died. Their hunger agitated them, it drove them to search and strive, and while any human onlooker was tempted to colour such behaviour with their own emotional palette, Daniel told himself that the Phites' suffering was a shallow thing, little more than the instinct that jerked his own hand back from a flame before he'd even registered discomfort.

They were not the equal of humans. Not yet.

And if he lost his nerve, they never would be.

Daniel dreamt that he was inside Sapphire, but there were no Phites in sight. In front of him stood a sleek black monolith; a thin stream



of pus wept from a crack in its smooth, obsidian surface. Someone was holding him by the wrist, trying to force his hand into a reeking pit in the ground. The pit, he knew, was piled high with things he did not want to see, let alone touch.

He thrashed around until he woke, but the sense of pressure on his wrist remained. It was coming from his watch. As he focused on the one-word message he'd received, his stomach tightened. Lucien would not have dared to wake him at this hour for some run-of-the-mill result.

Daniel rose, dressed, then sat in his office sipping coffee. He did not know why he was so reluctant to make the call. He had been waiting for this moment for more than twenty years, but it would not be the pinnacle of his life. After this, there would be a thousand more peaks, each one twice as magnificent as the last.

He finished the coffee then sat a while longer, massaging his temples, making sure his head was clear. He would not greet this new era bleary-eyed, half-awake. He recorded all his calls, but this was one he would retain for posterity.

"Lucien," he said. The man's image appeared, smiling. "Success?"

"They're talking to each other," Lucien replied.

"About what?"

"Food, weather, sex, death. The past, the future. You name it. They won't shut up."

Lucien sent transcripts on the data channel, and Daniel perused them. The linguistics software didn't just observe the Phites' behaviour and correlate it with the sounds they made; it peered right into their virtual brains and tracked the flow of information. Its task was far from trivial, and there was no guarantee that its translations were perfect, but Daniel did not believe it could hallucinate an entire language and fabricate these rich, detailed conversations out of thin air.

He flicked between statistical summaries, technical overviews of linguistic structure, and snippets from the millions of conversations the software had logged. *Food, weather, sex, death*. As human dialogue the translations would have seemed utterly banal, but in context they were riveting. These were not chatterbots blindly following Markov chains, designed to impress the judges in a Turing test. The Phites were discussing matters by which they genuinely lived and died.

When Daniel brought up a page of conversational topics in alphabetical order, his eyes were caught by the single entry under the letter G. *Grief*. He tapped the link, and spent a few minutes reading through samples, illustrating the appearance of the concept following the death of a child, a parent, a friend.

He kneaded his eyelids. It was three in the morning; there was a sickening clarity to everything, the kind that only night could bring. He turned to Lucien.

"No more death."

"Boss?" Lucien was startled.

"I want to make them immortal. Let them evolve culturally; let their ideas live and die. Let them modify their own brains, once they're smart enough; they can already tweak the rest of their anatomy."

"Where will you put them all?" Lucien demanded.

"I can afford another crystal. Maybe two more."

"That won't get you far. At the present birth rate –"

"We'll have to cut their fertility drastically, tapering it down to zero. After that, if they want to start reproducing again they'll really have to innovate." They would need to learn about the outside world, and comprehend its alien physics well enough to design new hardware into which they could migrate.

Lucien scowled. "How will we control them? How will we shape

them? If we can't select the ones we want –"

Daniel said quietly, "This is not up for discussion." Whatever Julie Deghani had thought of him, he was not a monster; if he believed that these creatures were as conscious as he was, he was not going to slaughter them like cattle – or stand by and let them die 'naturally', when the rules of this world were his to rewrite at will.

"We'll shape them through their memes," he said. "We'll kill off the bad memes, and help spread the ones we want to succeed." He would need to keep an iron grip on the Phites and their culture, though, or he would never be able to trust them. If he wasn't going to literally *breed them* for loyalty and gratitude, he would have to do the same with their ideas.

Lucien said, "We're not prepared for any of this. We're going to need new software, new analysis and intervention tools."

Daniel understood. "Freeze time in Sapphire. Then tell the team they've got eighteen months."

## 4

Daniel sold his shares in WiddulHands, and had two more crystals built. One was to support a higher population in Sapphire, so there was as large a pool of diversity among the immortal Phites as possible; the other was to run the software – which Lucien had dubbed the Thought Police – needed to keep tabs on what they were doing. If human overseers had had to monitor and shape the evolving culture every step of the way, that would have slowed things down to a glacial pace. Still, automating the process completely was tricky, and Daniel preferred to err on the side of caution, with the Thought Police freezing Sapphire and notifying him whenever the situation became too delicate.

If the end of death was greeted by the Phites with a mixture of puzzlement and rejoicing, the end of birth was not so easy to accept. When all attempts by mating couples to sculpt their excess beads into offspring became as ineffectual as shaping dolls out of clay, it led to a mixture of persistence and distress that was painful to witness. Humans were accustomed to failing to conceive, but this was more like still birth after still birth. Even when Daniel intervened to modify the Phites' basic drives, some kind of cultural or emotional inertia kept many of them going through the motions. Though their new instincts urged them merely to pool their spare beads and then stop, sated, they would continue with the old version of the act regardless, forlorn and confused, trying to shape the useless puddle into something that lived and breathed.

*Move on, Daniel thought. Get over it.* There was only so much sympathy he could muster for immortal beings who would fill the galaxy with their children, if they ever got their act together.

The Phites didn't yet have writing, but they'd developed a strong oral tradition, and some put their mourning for the old ways into elegiac words. The Thought Police identified those memes, and ensured that they didn't spread far. Some Phites chose to kill themselves rather than live in the barren new world. Daniel felt he had no right to stop them, but mysterious obstacles blocked the paths of anyone who tried, irresponsibly, to romanticise or encourage such acts.

The Phites could only die by their own volition, but those who retained the will to live were not free to doze the centuries away. Daniel decreed no more terrible famines, but he hadn't abolished hunger itself, and he kept enough pressure on the food supply and other resources to force the Phites to keep innovating, refining agriculture, developing trade.

The Thought Police identified and nurtured the seeds of writing, mathematics, and natural science. The physics of Sapphire was a



simplified, game-world model, not so arbitrary as to be incoherent, but not so deep and complex that you needed particle physics to get to the bottom of it. As crystal time sped forward and the immortals sought solace in understanding their world, Sapphire soon had its Euclid and Archimedes, its Galileo and its Newton; their ideas spread with supernatural efficiency, bringing forth a torrent of mathematicians and astronomers.

Sapphire's stars were just a planetarium-like backdrop, present only to help the Phites get their notions of heliocentricity and inertia right, but its moon was as real as the world itself. The technology needed to reach it was going to take a while, but that was all right; Daniel didn't want them getting ahead of themselves. There was a surprise waiting for them there, and his preference was for a flourishing of biotech and computing before they faced that revelation.

Between the absence of fossils, Sapphire's limited biodiversity, and all the clunky external meddling that needed to be covered up, it was hard for the Phites to reach a grand Darwinian view of biology, but their innate skill with beads gave them a head start in the practical arts. With a little nudging, they began tinkering with their bodies, correcting some inconvenient anatomical quirks that they'd missed in their pre-conscious phase.

As they refined their knowledge and techniques, Daniel let them imagine that they were working towards restoring fertility; after all, that was perfectly true, even if their goal was a few conceptual revolutions further away than they realised. Humans had had their naive notions of a Philosopher's Stone dashed, but they'd still achieved nuclear transmutation in the end.

The Phites, he hoped, would transmute *themselves*: inspect their own brains, make sense of them, and begin to improve them. It was a staggering task to expect of anyone; even Lucien and his team, with their God's-eye view of the creatures, couldn't come close. But when the crystal was running at full speed, the Phites could think millions of times faster than their creators. If Daniel could keep them from straying off course, everything that humanity might once have conceived of as the fruits of millennia of progress was now just a matter of months away.

5

Lucien said, "We're losing track of the language."

Daniel was in his Houston office; he'd come to Texas for a series of face-to-face meetings, to see if he could raise some much-needed cash by licensing the crystal fabrication process. He would have preferred to keep the technology to himself, but he was almost certain that he was too far ahead of his rivals now for any of them to stand a chance of catching up with him.

"What do you mean, losing track?" Daniel demanded. Lucien had briefed him just three hours before, and given no warning of an impending crisis.

The Thought Police, Lucien explained, had done their job well: they had pushed the neural self-modification meme for all it was worth, and now a successful form of 'brain boosting' was spreading across Sapphire. It required a detailed 'recipe' but no technological aids; the same innate skills for observing and manipulating beads that the Phites had used to copy themselves during reproduction were enough.

All of this was much as Daniel had hoped it would be, but there was an alarming downside. The boosted Phites were adopting a dense and complex new language, and the analysis software couldn't make sense of it.

"Slow them down further," Daniel suggested. "Give the linguistics

more time to run."

"I've already frozen Sapphire," Lucien replied. "The linguistics have been running for an hour, with the full resources of an entire crystal."

Daniel said irritably, "We can see exactly what they've done to their brains. How can we not understand the effects on the language?"

"In the general case," Lucien said, "deducing a language from nothing but neural anatomy is computationally intractable. With the old language, we were lucky; it had a simple structure, and it was highly correlated with obvious behavioural elements. The new language is much more abstract and conceptual. We might not even have our own correlates for half the concepts."

Daniel had no intention of letting events in Sapphire slip out of his control. It was one thing to hope that the Phites would, eventually, be juggling real-world physics that was temporarily beyond his comprehension, but any bright ten-year-old could grasp the laws of their present universe, and their technology was still far from rocket science.

He said, "Keep Sapphire frozen, and study your records of the Phites who first performed this boost. If they understood what they were doing, we can work it out too."

At the end of the week, Daniel signed the licensing deal and flew back to San Francisco. Lucien briefed him daily, and at Daniel's urging hired a dozen new computational linguists to help with the problem.

After six months, it was clear that they were getting nowhere. The Phites who'd invented the boost had had one big advantage as they'd tinkered with each other's brains: it had not been a purely theoretical exercise for them. They hadn't gazed at anatomical diagrams and then reasoned their way to a better design. They had *experienced* the effects of thousands of small experimental changes, and the results had shaped their intuition for the process. Very little of that intuition had been spoken aloud, let alone written down and formalised. And the process of decoding those insights from a purely structural view of their brains was every bit as difficult as decoding the language itself.

Daniel couldn't wait any longer. With the crystal heading for the market, and other comparable technologies approaching fruition, he couldn't allow his lead to melt away.

"We need the Phites themselves to act as translators," he told Lucien. "We need to contrive a situation where there's a large enough pool who choose not to be boosted that the old language continues to be used."

"So we need maybe twenty-five per cent refusing the boost?" Lucien suggested. "And we need the boosted Phites to want to keep them informed of what's happening, in terms that we can all understand."

Daniel said, "Exactly."

"I think we can slow down the uptake of boosting," Lucien mused, "while we encourage a traditionalist meme that says it's better to span the two cultures and languages than replace the old entirely with the new."

Lucien's team set to work, tweaking the Thought Police for the new task, then restarting Sapphire itself.

Their efforts seemed to yield the desired result: the Phites were corralled into valuing the notion of maintaining a link to their past, and while the boosted Phites surged ahead, they also worked hard to keep the unboosted in the loop.

It was a messy compromise, though, and Daniel wasn't happy with the prospect of making do with a watered-down, Sapphire-for-Dummies version of the Phites' intellectual achievements. What he



really wanted was someone on the inside reporting to him directly, like a Phite version of Lucien.

It was time to start thinking about job interviews.

Lucien was running Sapphire more slowly than usual – to give the Thought Police a computational advantage now that they'd lost so much raw surveillance data – but even at the reduced rate, it took just six real-time days for the boosted Phites to invent computers, first as a mathematical formalism and, shortly afterwards, as a succession of practical machines.

Daniel had already asked Lucien to notify him if any Phite guessed the true nature of their world. In the past, a few had come up with vague metaphysical speculations that weren't too wide of the mark, but now that they had a firm grasp of the idea of universal computation, they were finally in a position to understand the crystal as more than an idle fantasy.

The message came just after midnight, as Daniel was preparing for bed. He went into his office and activated the intervention tool that Lucien had written for him, specifying a serial number for the Phite in question.

The tool prompted Daniel to provide a human-style name for his interlocutor, to facilitate communication. Daniel's mind went blank, but after waiting twenty seconds the software offered its own suggestion: Primo.

Primo was boosted, and he had recently built a computer of his own. Shortly afterwards, the Thought Police had heard him telling a couple of unboosted friends about an amusing possibility that had occurred to him.

Sapphire was slowed to a human pace, then Daniel took control of a Phite avatar and the tool contrived a meeting, arranging for the two of them to be alone in the shelter that Primo had built for himself. In accordance with the current architectural style the wooden building was actually still alive, self-repairing and anchored to the ground by roots.

Primo said, "Good morning. I don't believe we've met."

It was no great breach of protocol for a stranger to enter one's shelter uninvited, but Primo was understating his surprise; in this world of immortals, but no passenger jets, bumping into strangers anywhere was rare.

"I'm Daniel." The tool would invent a Phite name for Primo to hear. "I heard you talking to your friends last night about your new computer. Wondering what these machines might do in the future. Wondering if they could ever grow powerful enough to contain a whole world."

"I didn't see you there," Primo replied.

"I wasn't there," Daniel explained. "I live outside this world. I built the computer that contains this world."

Primo made a gesture that the tool annotated as amusement, then he spoke a few words in the boosted language. *Insults? A jest? A test of Daniel's omniscience?* Daniel decided to bluff his way through, and act as if the words were irrelevant.

He said, "Let the rain start." Rain began pounding on the roof of the shelter. "Let the rain stop." Daniel gestured with one claw at a large cooking pot in a corner of the room. "Sand. Flower. Fire. Water jug." The pot obliged him, taking on each form in turn.

Primo said, "Very well. I believe you, Daniel." Daniel had had some experience reading the Phites' body language directly, and to him Primo seemed reasonably calm. Perhaps when you were as old as he was, and had witnessed so much change, such a revelation was far less of a shock than it would have been to a human at the dawn of the computer age.

"You created this world?" Primo asked him.

"Yes."

"You shaped our history?"

"In part," Daniel said. "Many things have been down to chance, or to your own choices."

"Did you stop us having children?" Primo demanded.

"Yes," Daniel admitted.

"Why?"

"There is no room left in the computer. It was either that, or many more deaths."

Primo pondered this. "So you could have stopped the death of my parents, had you wished?"

"I could bring them back to life, if you want that." This wasn't a lie; Daniel had stored detailed snapshots of all the last mortal Phites. "But not yet; only when there's a bigger computer. When there's room for them."

"Could you bring back *their* parents? And their parents' parents? Back to the beginning of time?"

"No. That information is lost."

Primo said, "What is this talk of waiting for a bigger computer? You could easily stop time from passing for us, and only start it again when your new computer is built."

"No," Daniel said, "I can't. Because *I need you to build the computer*. I'm not like you: I'm not immortal, and my brain can't be boosted. I've done my best, now I need you to do better. The only way that can happen is if you learn the science of my world, and come up with a way to make this new machine."

Primo walked over to the water jug that Daniel had magicked into being. "It seems to me that you were ill-prepared for the task you set yourself. If you'd waited for the machine you really needed, our lives would not have been so hard. And if such a machine could not be built in your lifetime, what was to stop your grandchildren from taking on that task?"

"I had no choice," Daniel insisted. "I couldn't leave your creation to my descendants. There is a war coming between my people. I needed your help. I needed strong allies."

"You have no friends in your own world?"

"Your time runs faster than mine. I needed the kind of allies that only your people can become, in time."

Primo said, "What exactly do you want of us?"

"To build the new computer you need," Daniel replied. "To grow in numbers, to grow in strength. Then to raise me up, to make me greater than I was, as I've done for you. When the war is won, there will be peace forever. Side by side, we will rule a thousand worlds."

"And what do you want of *me*?" Primo asked. "Why are you speaking to me, and not to all of us?"

"Most people," Daniel said, "aren't ready to hear this. It's better that they don't learn the truth yet. But I need one person who can work for me directly. I can see and hear everything in your world, but I need you to make sense of it. I need you to understand things for me."

Primo was silent.

Daniel said, "I gave you life. How can you refuse me?"

6

Daniel pushed his way through the small crowd of protesters gathered at the entrance to his San Francisco tower. He could have come and gone by helicopter instead, but his security consultants had assessed these people as posing no significant threat. A small amount of bad PR didn't bother him; he was no longer selling



anything that the public could boycott directly, and none of the businesses he dealt with seemed worried about being tainted by association. He'd broken no laws, and confirmed no rumours. A few feral cyberphiles waving placards reading SOFTWARE IS NOT YOUR SLAVE! meant nothing.

Still, if he ever found out which one of his employees had leaked details of the project, he'd break their legs.

Daniel was in the elevator when Lucien messaged him: MOON VERY SOON! He halted the elevator's ascent, and redirected it to the basement.

All three crystals were housed in the basement now, just centimetres away from the Play Pen: a vacuum chamber containing an atomic force microscope with fifty thousand independently movable tips, arrays of solid-state lasers and photodetectors, and thousands of micro-wells stocked with samples of all the stable chemical elements. The time lag between Sapphire and this machine had to be as short as possible, in order for the Phites to be able to conduct experiments in real-world physics while their own world was running at full speed.

Daniel pulled up a stool and sat beside the Play Pen. If he wasn't going to slow Sapphire down, it was pointless aspiring to watch developments as they unfolded. He'd probably view a replay of the lunar landing when he went up to his office, but by the time he screened it, it would be ancient history.

'One giant leap' would be an understatement; wherever the Phites landed on the moon, they would find a strange black monolith waiting for them. Inside would be the means to operate the Play Pen; it would not take them long to learn the controls, or to understand what this signified. If they were really slow in grasping what they'd found, Daniel had instructed Primo to explain it to them.

The physics of the real world was far more complex than the kind the Phites were used to, but then, no human had ever been on intimate terms with quantum field theory either, and the Thought Police had already encouraged the Phites to develop most of the mathematics they'd need to get started. In any case, it didn't matter if the Phites took longer than humans to discover twentieth-century scientific principles, and move beyond them. Seen from the outside, it would happen within hours, days, weeks at the most.

A row of indicator lights blinked on; the Play Pen was active. Daniel's throat went dry. The Phites were finally reaching out of their own world into his.

A panel above the machine displayed histograms classifying the experiments the Phites had performed so far. By the time Daniel was paying attention, they had already discovered the kinds of bonds that could be formed between various atoms, and constructed thousands of different small molecules. As he watched, they carried out spectroscopic analyses, built simple nanomachines, and manufactured devices that were, unmistakably, memory elements and logic gates.

The Phites wanted children, and they understood now that this was the only way. They would soon be building a world in which they were not just more numerous, but faster and smarter than they were inside the crystal. And that would only be the first of a thousand iterations. They were working their way towards Godhood, and they would lift up their own creator as they ascended.

Daniel left the basement and headed for his office. When he arrived, he called Lucien.

"They've built an atomic-scale computer," Lucien announced. "And they've fed some fairly complex software into it. It doesn't seem to be an upload, though. Certainly not a direct copy on the level of beads." He sounded flustered; Daniel had forbidden him

to risk screwing up the experiments by slowing down Sapphire, so even with Primo's briefings to help him it was difficult for him to keep abreast of everything.

"Can you model their computer, and then model what the software is doing?" Daniel suggested.

Lucien said, "We only have six atomic physicists on the team; the Phites already outnumber us on that score by about a thousand to one. By the time we have any hope of making sense of this, they'll be doing something different."

"What does Primo say?" The Thought Police hadn't been able to get Primo included in any of the lunar expeditions, but Lucien had given him the power to make himself invisible and teleport to any part of Sapphire or the lunar base. Wherever the action was, he was free to eavesdrop.

"Primo has trouble understanding a lot of what he hears; even the boosted aren't universal polymaths and instant experts in every kind of jargon. The gist of it is that the Lunar Project people have made a very fast computer in the Outer World, and it's going to help with the fertility problem...somehow." Lucien laughed. "Hey, maybe the Phites will do exactly what we did: see if they can evolve something smart enough to give them a hand. How cool would that be?"

Daniel was not amused. Somebody had to do some real work eventually; if the Phites just passed the buck, the whole enterprise would collapse like a pyramid scheme.

Daniel had some business meetings he couldn't put off. By the time he'd swept all the bullshit aside, it was early afternoon. The Phites had now built some kind of tiny solid-state accelerator, and were probing the internal structure of protons and neutrons by pounding them with high-speed electrons. An atomic computer wired up to various detectors was doing the data analysis, processing the results faster than any in-world computer could. The Phites had already figured out the standard quark model. Maybe they were going to skip uploading into nanocomputers, and head straight for some kind of femtomachine?

Digests of Primo's briefings made no mention of using the strong force for computing, though. They were still just satisfying their curiosity about the fundamental laws. Daniel reminded himself of their history. They had burrowed down to what seemed like the foundations of physics before, only to discover that those simple rules were nothing to do with the ultimate reality. It made sense that they would try to dig as deeply as they could into the mysteries of the Outer World before daring to found a colony, let alone emigrate *en masse*.

By sunset the Phites were probing the surroundings of the Play Pen with various kinds of radiation. The levels were extremely low – certainly too low to risk damaging the crystals – so Daniel saw no need to intervene. The Play Pen itself did not have a massive power supply, it contained no radioisotopes, and the Thought Police would ring alarm bells and bring in human experts if some kind of tabletop fusion experiment got underway, so Daniel was reasonably confident that the Phites couldn't do anything stupid and blow the whole thing up.

Primo's briefings made it clear that they thought they were engaged in a kind of 'astronomy'. Daniel wondered if he should give them access to instruments for doing serious observations – the kind that would allow them to understand relativistic gravity and cosmology. Even if he bought time on a large telescope, though, just pointing it would take an eternity for the Phites. He wasn't going to slow Sapphire down and then grow old while they explored the sky; next thing they'd be launching space probes on thirty-year missions. Maybe it was time to ramp up the level of collaboration,



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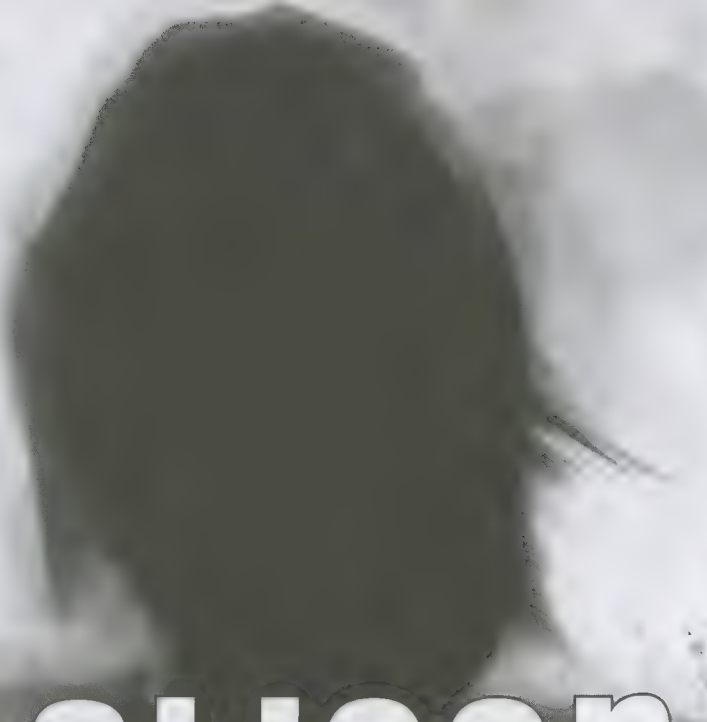
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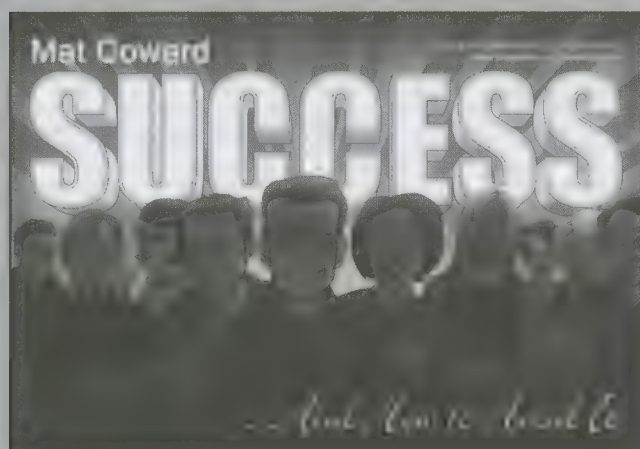
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**SCIENCE**



and just hand them some astronomy texts and star maps? Human culture had its own hard-won achievements that the Phites couldn't easily match.

As the evening wore on, the Phites shifted their focus back to the subatomic world. A new kind of accelerator began smashing single gold ions together at extraordinary energies – though the total power being expended was still minuscule. Primo soon announced that they'd mapped all three generations of quarks and leptons. The Phites' knowledge of particle physics was drawing level with humanity's; Daniel couldn't follow the technical details any more, but the experts were giving it all the thumbs up. Daniel felt a surge of pride; of course his children knew what they were doing, and if they'd reached the point where they could momentarily bamboozle him, soon he'd ask them to catch their breath and bring him up to speed. Before he permitted them to emigrate, he'd slow the crystals down and introduce himself to everyone. In fact, that might be the perfect time to set them their next task: to understand human biology, well enough to upload him. To make him immortal, to repay their debt.

He sat watching images of the Phites' latest computers, reconstructions based on data flowing to and from the AFM tips. Vast lattices of shimmering atoms stretched off into the distance, the electron clouds that joined them quivering like beads of mercury in some surreal liquid abacus. As he watched, an inset window told him that the ion accelerators had been re-designed, and fired up again.

Daniel grew restless. He walked to the elevator. There was nothing he could see in the basement that he couldn't see from his office, but he wanted to stand beside the Play Pen, put his hand on the casing, press his nose against the glass. The era of Sapphire as a virtual world with no consequences in his own was coming to an end; he wanted to stand beside the thing itself and be reminded that it was as solid as he was.

The elevator descended, passing the tenth floor, the ninth, the eighth. Without warning, Lucien's voice burst from Daniel's watch, priority audio crashing through every barrier of privacy and protocol. "Boss, there's radiation. Net power gain. Get to the helicopter, *now*."

Daniel hesitated, contemplating an argument. If this was fusion, why hadn't it been detected and curtailed? He jabbed the stop button and felt the brakes engage. Then the world dissolved into brightness and pain.

## 7

When Daniel emerged from the opiate haze, a doctor informed him that he had burns to sixty per cent of his body. More from heat than from radiation. He was not going to die.

There was a net terminal by the bed. Daniel called Lucien and learnt what the physicists on the team had tentatively concluded, having studied the last of the Play Pen data that had made it off-site.

It seemed the Phites had discovered the Higgs field, and engineered a burst of something akin to cosmic inflation. What they'd done wasn't as simple as merely inflating a tiny patch of vacuum into a new universe, though. Not only had they managed to create a 'cool Big Bang', they had pulled a large chunk of ordinary matter into the pocket universe they'd made, after which the wormhole leading to it had shrunk to subatomic size and fallen through the Earth.

They had taken the crystals with them, of course. If they'd tried to upload themselves into the pocket universe through the lunar data link, the Thought Police would have stopped them. So they'd emigrated by another route entirely. They had snatched their whole

substrate, and ran.

Opinions were divided over exactly what else the new universe would contain. The crystals and the Play Pen floating in a void, with no power source, would leave the Phites effectively dead, but some of the team believed there could be a thin plasma of protons and electrons too, created by a form of Higgs decay that bypassed the unendurable quark-gluon fireball of a hot Big Bang. If they'd built the right nanomachines, there was a chance that they could convert the Play Pen into a structure that would keep the crystals safe, while the Phites slept through the long wait for the first starlight.

The tiny skin samples the doctors had taken finally grew into sheets large enough to graft. Daniel bounced between dark waves of pain and medicated euphoria, but one idea stayed with him throughout the turbulent journey, like a guiding star: *Primo had betrayed him*. He had given the fucker life, entrusted him with power, granted him privileged knowledge, showered him with the favours of the Gods. And how had he been repaid? He was back to zero. He'd spoken to his lawyers; having heard rumours of an 'illegal radiation source', the insurance company was not going to pay out on the crystals without a fight.

Lucien came to the hospital, in person. Daniel was moved; they hadn't met face-to-face since the job interview. He shook the man's hand.

"You didn't betray me."

Lucien looked embarrassed. "I'm resigning, boss."

Daniel was stung, but he forced himself to accept the news stoically. "I understand; you have no choice. Gupta will have a crystal of his own by now. You have to be on the winning side, in the war of the Gods."

Lucien put his resignation letter on the bedside table. "What war? Are you still clinging to that fantasy where überdorks battle to turn the moon into computronium?"

Daniel blinked. "Fantasy? If you didn't believe it, why were you working with me?"

"You paid me. Extremely well."

"So how much will Gupta be paying you? I'll double it."

Lucien shook his head, amused. "I'm not going to work for Gupta. I'm moving into particle physics. The Phites weren't all that far ahead of us when they escaped; maybe forty or fifty years. Once we catch up, I guess a private universe will cost about as much as a private island; maybe less in the long run. But no one's going to be battling for control of this one, throwing grey goo around like monkeys flinging turds while they draw up their plans for Matrioshka brains."

Daniel said, "If you take any data from the Play Pen logs –"

"I'll honour all the confidentiality clauses in my contract." Lucien smiled. "But anyone can take an interest in the Higgs field; that's public domain."

After he left, Daniel bribed the nurse to crank up his medication, until even the sting of betrayal and disappointment began to fade.

*A universe, he thought happily. Soon I'll have a universe of my own.*

*But I'm going to need some workers in there, some allies, some companions. I can't do it all alone; someone has to carry the load.* ☼

Greg Egan last appeared in these pages with 'Singleton' (12176). His novel *Incandescence* will be published by Gollancz in the UK and by Night Shade Books in the USA in May. A story collection, *Dark Integers and Other Stories*, is out in March from Subterranean Books. For more information on these books and much more please visit Greg's website at [gregegan.net](http://gregegan.net).



# JOY MARCHAND

ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

# HOLDING

The fasten seat belt sign was on, Flight 219 was on its seventeenth pass over LAX, and there was an alien in seat 1A.

Nanette knew that there were scarier individuals who could be sitting in 1A sucking down Johnny Walkers than an alien from another planet. For instance, a guest on her favorite talk show was in prison for roasting and eating his mother. After hearing about that guy, one sweaty alien dressed like an optometrist was singularly un-intimidating. Besides, he looked familiar, and his alien death device looked like a ballpoint pen.

Rummaging in the First Class liquor cache for more Johnny Walker, Nanette tried to block out the sound of Portia and Minn falling apart. Their desperate keening rose and fell in a wash of operatic fear that was impossible to ignore. "For crying out loud," said Nan, rattling ice cubes. "You're like a Tammy Faye look-alike contest with surround sound."

The formidable Portia – once known as Travis K. Pimentel of Abilene, Texas – sat with her size-14 pumps touching at the toes. She was squeezing Minn in her great arms, as if clutching a tiny Asian teddy bear. "It's always the same," said Portia. "All the stuff people say about terrorists. Emergency services will need metal detectors to find all our pieces on Venice Beach."

"Who said anything about terrorists?" Nanette peered around the curtain at the alien in 1A and poured his drink. According to stews like Portia, everyone on every plane had a corkscrew, a box cutter, or a dab of plastic explosive and a fuse. Every man who wore a cloth on his head had a holy mission, and every Asian woman had a briefcase full of sarin nerve gas and the conscience of Dr Mengele. To fight this terror, flight attendants romped with the flight crew, abused tranquilizers and attempted suicide left and right. It was always the same damned depressing story. Nanette took the Johnny Walker to 1A and sat down in 1B.

"Here's your drink," she said. "The whole world's going to hell, but it's nothing a little booze can't fix, right honey?"

The sweaty alien looked at Nan. Like a regular middle-aged white guy, he wiped his forehead with a pocket square and took the drink. With a grateful look, he drained the highball glass to the ice. "Booze can't fix it," he said, wiping his mouth. "It's always the same. We circle twenty times, then we crash."

Nan opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

Even though he'd gotten his way, Hector was pulling the same macho crap he always did. He was too manly to admit he was sick as a dog, and too distracted by his fear of flying to put his hand on Luisa's belly to feel the baby kick. "He'll play soccer one day," Luisa said, hoping paternal pride would take the constipated look from Hector's face.

"We keep going around," Hector said. He had claimed the window seat by making little noises about how many times Luisa had to get up to pee. His handsome, boyish face was dark with anxiety, and he kept wrenching the sun visor up and down on the window, as if the violent repetition would somehow help. "Are these *gringos* too stupid to land a plane?"

With all the fuss he was making, she couldn't help noticing the cuffs of his shirt, which he'd started to destroy by picking the threads out. Luisa turned away. It was impossible to talk to him when he turned inward onto his own insecurities and began to destroy things. She rested her hands on her belly to feel the oceanic swell of the baby, and she smiled. "*Ai, Miguelito*," she whispered. "What a strong boy you will be."

Hector was right about their arrangement. The aisle seat really was more convenient for someone who had to pee every ten minutes. The unsettling thing had been the way he had spoken to her when claiming the seat – the way he'd hidden his true motives with excuses that were beyond reproach. Plain and simple, he'd wanted the window seat so he could look out at America's crazy quilt of farmland, and imagine crashing into it. But he would never in his life admit such a thing.

The thought burned Luisa deep in her spine, and she levered herself up and out of her seat to escape it. She waddled to the lavatory in the back of the plane and locked herself in. As she yanked her stretch pants down and hunkered over the toilet seat to pee, she noticed how much the lavatory was like marriage. You had to move around in a space much too small for a human being. The space had been dressed up with scented soap and pink facial tissue, but the surface details didn't make the space feel any larger than a confessional. To drown out the sound of her pee hitting the metal basin, she prayed. *Holy Mother of God, hear the prayer of the Church for all mothers.*

Smelling of antiseptic and fancy pump soap, Luisa returned to her seat. When she saw Hector hunched against the window with an airline pillow under his head, she breathed a sigh of relief and sat back. A sweet moment of peace followed, and she reached to caress an inky comma of hair from his fine brow – but stopped short of touching him. Hector wasn't asleep. The muscles of his jaw were clenched, and his eyes had that scrunch at the corners that said he was aware of her every movement. He ignored Luisa's sudden intake of breath, as Miguel chose that moment to kick her in the heart.

Luisa cradled her belly and imagined her son growing taller and taller, until he stood over his father like a church over a woodshed. She set each stone into place with a mortar of bitter tears, knowing that Miguelito would be like his father, just as Hector was like Miguel Concepcion. *Muy macho. Muy infantil.*

*Oh Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Grace, Hope of the world. Hear us, your children, who cry to you.*

Nanette glanced down the aisle at the pregnant Hispanic woman, and turned back to the alien. "You know their stories? Each and every one?"

The alien had wiped out the Johnny Walker and was starting on the J&B. He had arranged a squadron of bottles on his tray table, miniature green soldiers. It had taken him one full pass over LAX to relate the story of Luisa and Miguel, and the effort had drained him. "It's always the same," he said, resting his head on the seat



# PATTERN





back. "Luisa uses the aft lavatory, we circle LAX twice more, then we crash."

"How do I know you're really an alien?"

The alien regarded her. He had the sweaty, earnest look of an aging Boy Scout leader trying to show courage in the face of adversity. With a pained grumble, he spat out his tongue, which unrolled like a prehensile necktie. A moist snap, and the alien had zapped a peanut from Nanette's tray table. He sat crunching it. "I never said I was an alien."

Her eyes wide, Nanette cracked open a mini J&B and took a swig. It was a violation of flight attendant protocol, but she wanted to avoid collapsing like Portia and Minn, who were still huddled by the cockpit, crying like puppies. "Captain says the landing gear won't go down," she said, ejecting a cloud of scotch fumes. "Regular old equipment malfunction."

The alien shrugged. "Sometimes it's faulty landing gear. Sometimes there's a suitcase on board with a flesh-eating virus. Sometimes the co-pilot has a stroke and inadvertently knocks the pilot unconscious, while flailing around in pain. The cause can fluctuate, but the outcome is always the same." Using the alien device, he played an uncomfortable melody on the J&B bottles.

Nanette twitched. "You *can* stop this, can't you?"

Noticing her discomfort, the alien let the fractured song fade away. "I don't know what gives you that idea, Cupcake. No matter how many times we travel the closed loop, you always seem to think we can stop it. Maybe you can; but I can't."

Nanette fumbled for the bottle of Merlot she'd snagged from the First Class luncheon stash and made short work of the cork. The first swallow made her shudder. "Are you saying we've been in this situation in a past life or something? I don't believe in reincarnation, pet psychics, or men from Venus."

"In this pocket of space-time, this is the only situation there is." The alien lifted the window shade and looked out at the fathomless smog of the LA skyline. "Insignificant factors vary. Sometimes I'm wearing a different colored suit. Sometimes you serve pretzels instead of peanuts. But everything else is pretty much the same. Luisa never tells Hector to grow up."

"In this pocket of space-time?" Nan touched her forehead. "Wait a second – I know this. You mean to say nothing exists but this one flight. It just keeps going over and over again." She shook it off, gesticulated with the bottle. "Listen up. I know growing up in a trailer, taking care of a pot-bellied single dad with too much charisma and not enough ambition isn't much of a life story. But you can't tell me it didn't happen." She took a messy drink, and a droplet of expensive red wine splashed on her ivory silk cravat. "Ack. See? You can take the girl out of the trailer park, but trash is forever. Hand me a napkin, you."

The alien handed her his neatly folded pocket square. "You know, it pisses me off that you can remember the physics of the loop, but never my name. It's *Franklin*, for Pete's sake."

"Nice name. Call me Nan."

The alien rattled another song on the bottles, grooving to a shattered scale never heard on Earth. "The only thing about sweet Nanette that never changes is her name."

Nanette belched and relaxed into her seat. Something about the alien's melancholy brought to mind her favorite talk show, a new tragicomic cast of characters every week. Teenaged hookers in a fistfight over their spotty fifteen-year-old pimp. A man in a tuxedo begging his mother for a nuptial blessing, his blushing bride standing by with a bouquet nestled in the cleavage of fake breasts so large she had to wheel them around in a cart. Folks in the audience

laughed, but Nan, sitting in airport motel rooms with a remote in her hand, never did.

She wept like a child.

Michael was sitting in the window seat reading *Field and Stream*. Seth was reading *The Sun Also Rises*, and he paused to imagine what Michael would look like running with the bulls in Pamplona. Lying in the avenue smeared with his own gore, he'd say *I once had a fish-hook in my lip. That hurt much worse*. He might bleed to death in Spain from a thousand crushing hooves, but he'd be butch, stoic, cool. A protest ejected itself from Seth. "They'll blame it all on me."

Michael didn't look up. The lesion on his face looked like a sexy mole. "They won't blame you for anything. The day M and P found me and Fabian the Magician practicing x-rated handcuff tricks in the pool house, they formed an opinion of me that will never change. I'm their prodigal faggot, and you're my innocent, hemophiliac concubine." Michael turned the page.

"I hate it when you call me that."

"Fine. Gender Neutral Domestic Partner."

"Who hires a *magician* for a sixteenth birthday party?"

"I did. Found his number in the men's room at P's country club. He came highly recommended."

Seth jammed the abused Hemingway novel into the facing seat back and put on his headphones. Everything about Mike was flip, his voice, his closed expression. Even his goddamned *hair* was flip, styled away from his face so 'M' wouldn't bitch about not being able to see her boy's 'beautiful blue peepers'. God help Michael, it was always the same. Instead of talking, he put on his butch armor and went to battle with lances of irony.

Seth slouched lower in his seat, grimacing at the airline programming; it was a particularly heinous urban legend that all queers loved Cher. Distracted, he glanced at the orderly lineup of airsickness bags on Michael's tray table, and quickly looked away. It was the brutal HIV cocktail, not airsickness, that sent Mike's nausea into overdrive, and Seth felt the old terror rise.

He slipped out of his seat to retrieve his camera bag from the overhead bin. Michael's backpack shifted, pills slithered and rattled, and Seth slammed the bin shut again. The path to the First Class lavatory was blocked by a weepy-looking flight attendant leaning over a pasty-faced guy in a tacky suit. The attendant looked around, but Seth avoided her gaze as he wedged past her, and crammed himself into the toilet cubicle.

The first Xanax burned on the way down, and with a grimace, Seth wished he could empty all of his pill bottles into the bin marked WASTE. Seth was only twenty-eight, Mike was thirty-one, and their combined prescription sheet looked like the telephone directory for a small town. Aside from his own complicated HIV cocktail, Seth had Xanax for anxiety, Welbutrin for depression, Viagra for erectile dysfunction. Who could maintain an erection when it could kill someone?

The overhead speaker in the lavatory crackled. "Attention, passengers, this is your captain speaking. Although we're still working to resolve our mechanical difficulties, it's my duty to inform you that this flight may terminate in a water landing. Please review the emergency cards located in your seat pockets. Flight attendants, please tour the cabin –"

Halfway through the captain's speech, Seth cracked open the Xanax again. Choking down a second bitter pill, he imagined how Michael was taking the captain's message. On a subscription card for *Field and Stream*, Michael would be composing his own epitaph in Latin. *It is right and good that a faggot should go down in flames.*



*Dulce et decorum est.* Seth shoved out of the lavatory, bumping the worn-looking flight attendant.

She steadied herself on his arm. "Just say you're sorry."

Seth recoiled. She had a kind enough face, but her breath smelled like a frat house carpet. He thought about shoving past her, but percolating with Xanax, he felt he could hardly blame her for getting smashed on the eve of destruction. "Okay," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take so long in the john."

She gave him a funny look, but he shinnied past her, glad to escape. When he slid into his seat, Michael didn't look up, though another airsick bag had been added to the collection. A strand of Michael's hair had come loose from the M-proof style. Seth itched to brush it into place. For a moment, he considered all the things he wanted to say that weren't in the pre-approved script. The words gathered in his mouth like mushy peas. With a sidelong glance, Seth took up his book, and slouched deeply in his seat. They would die that way together.

Butch. Stoic. Cool.

"It's not your fault," said Franklin. "One time you decked Seth to see if Michael would come to his rescue like a knight in shining armor. Michael had a cow, but we still crashed."

Nanette had resumed drinking, unsure if the splashing sound was the Merlot hitting the bottom of the bottle or the bottom of her stomach. "So because Luisa's a Catholic and doesn't believe in divorce, she never tells Hector to grow up. And because they have this code of silence, Seth never apologizes to Michael for infecting him, and Mike never forgives him. Christ."

Franklin made a circling motion with the alien detonator. "Around and around. The only person who does something different each time is you, Nan."

Nanette struggled to her feet. "This has been a hell of a neat distraction, Franklin. I don't know how you do that tongue thing, and the mind-reading thing is a great shtick, but I gotta go bully some stewards into verifying the emergency rows so some of these people will get a chance to live."

"No one gets a chance to live," said Franklin. "We crash, and then the timeline resets at take-off."

Nanette set the empty wine bottle on the alien's tray table and leaned in close. "Look, buster. If you really are an alien terrorist, you've had your kicks. Either activate the detonator or tell the captain how to repair the landing gear before I give you a black eye."

Franklin drew back against the fuselage, waving the alien device as if he'd never seen it before. "This? A detonator?" He tugged up the sleeve on his sport coat, clicked a button on the device and scribbled his name on a cocktail napkin. "It's just a pen, Nan. All those disaster scenarios? I didn't say I set them up. You watch too damn much TV."

Nanette made a moue. "According to you, I only exist from take-off to explosion."

"Touché." The alien made a flashy magician's pass over the pen and it was gone. Huffing, he reached out, teased his pocket square from her ear, whipped it into a rabbit shape, and used it to wipe his sweaty brow. "What made you think I was an alien, Cupcake? Or a terrorist?"

She straightened, her hair all in wisps. "You told me you were. An alien terrorist-optometrist. And something about the Boy Scouts." She looked at her hands. "I sound stupid."

"You're anything but stupid," said Franklin. "You've remembered my extraterrestrial nature all on your own this time, which is kind of interesting, if you consider the ramifications. Aren't you wondering

how you know what I want, before I've even asked, or why you're so calm?"

Nanette took a quick breath to argue, but slowly let it out again. She'd been serving him Johnny Walkers instead of gin and tonics, peanuts instead of crackers, interpreting his signals as if he were a red-eye regular. Nothing unusual about that though; she was a flight attendant. The best there was. "You're not an alien, Hon, just a horny frequent flyer from Kansas City having a joke at my expense. You're a sweaty, alcoholic, human man."

"This thing is hot." Smiling apologetically, Franklin took off his hair. Like an ancient Pekingese falling into a coma, it rolled over and played dead. Next to the sleeping wig, Franklin made a little pile of parts, two nicely shaped ears, a nose, and the gelatinous folds of a human face.

Nanette would have expected to scream, seeing an alien face unmasked, but surprisingly, Franklin wasn't bad looking. There was humor in the set of his three winking red eyes, sensitivity in the flutter of his vertical nostril slits, compassion in the cupid-bow curve of his lipless mouth. Compared to some of the plastic-surgery victims on the talk show circuit, Franklin was a catch. There were scarier things in the world.

As, for instance, Nanette was the only person on the doomed airplane who did something new each time.

"Nan?"

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

"Nan, just sit with me. Hold my hand."

Nanette sat down and took Franklin's hand. His appendage was still covered in fake human skin, and it was warm and rather nice to hold. "Talk fast, Magic Man. I've got flight attendants to bully, passengers to soothe, and a plane to save from certain destruction."

The alien sighed and closed his crimson eyes.

They wouldn't let Sal take any of her favorite things onto the airplane. No knitting needles or close-work scissors – not even a single *crochet hook*. Nellie wasn't sure how one might go about hijacking an airplane with a *crochet hook*, but it seemed someone had indeed smuggled *something* onto the plane, otherwise she and her sister wouldn't be hunched over the emergency card just then, trying to read with trifocals that should have been replaced five years ago. Mr Brabant had offered, but Nellie had never been the kind of woman who could let a man do for her. She and Sally struggled along, poor, but proud.

"Fine time for you to be thinking about that old bastard," said Sally. "Oh, Mr. Brabant. Your false teeth are so white."

Nellie tapped one of the card's cartoony pictures. "Do you see how you have to hold the flotation device, Sal?"

"Fuck the flotation device."

The security people had confiscated their craft kit down to the last tating shuttle, and all Nellie could do to fight Sal's fits was do the deep breathing, and try not to scream. "I can't help you unless you help yourself, Sal. You'll have to take off your shoes, so we should undo the laces right now."

"Piss!" Sally's eyes were mean little slits. "Shit-fuck!"

Nellie abandoned the card, clutched her handbag, and turned to look out the dark window at the clouds. There was a syringe in her purse, and enough insulin to send Sally off to Heaven if only Nellie could find the courage to use it. And there was the other option nestled at the very bottom of her bag – but that one was even worse and didn't bear thinking about.

The practice sentences came back to her, as they always did in troubled times. *Sal was suffering from dementia. I was only away*



for a moment. She must have shot herself up with too much insulin. Calla lilies, Mr Brabant, for my poor Sally's grave.

"We're going to die, Nellie, and all you can think about is that old ass...ass...asshole!"

Nellie looked up at a touch on her shoulder. It was the stewardess with the crazy hair, and she had a stain on her ivory silk cravat. "I'm sorry," Nellie said. "Sal has Tourette's."

As fearless as a battlefield nurse, the stewardess gathered Nellie's hands. "Send Sally to her rest, Miss Nellie. You and Mr Brabant have your whole lives ahead of you."

"B...b...but, but," Nellie ignored the flash of agony in her hips as she slid out of her seat to follow the stewardess up the aisle. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

The stewardess bent over a very pregnant Hispanic woman and Nellie watched, speechless, as she slipped the woman a pill, and mimed dropping it into a drink. The pregnant woman's handsome young husband was curled up in his seat, gibbering like a little boy having a tantrum.

"This will calm him down," said the stewardess, "so you can concentrate on your baby. Jesus loves the little children."

The woman considered the pill. She wiped her eyes, and got a hold of herself. "I keep hoping," she said, "that Jesus will open the window and suck Hector out. You know. Into Heaven."

While Nellie watched the Hispanic woman drop the pill into her husband's soft drink, she clutched her handbag closer. The sterile syringe crackled ominously, as if to remind Nellie that she had options too. Numb, she followed the stewardess down the aisle, and watched her dropped an amber pill bottle into the lap of a pale blond man reading a novel.

"You can put that back in your stash," said the stewardess, giving both startled men an accusing stare. "Maybe you can pull your heads out of your butts too. Dying quiet isn't the same as dying brave."

The two young men shifted in their seats, and looked up at the stewardess like actors who'd forgotten their lines. When the two men finally looked at each other and clasped hands, Nellie moved

past them with her gaze averted, embarrassed because there was no way to pass without intruding a little. Their whispering was full of *sorry, no, I'm sorry*, and as she shinnied by, Nellie thought it was a shame how some men had to wait until their last breath before showing each other a little affection.

She found the stewardess in First Class, comforting an ugly albino man in a badly tailored suit. Nellie wanted nothing more than to ask the stewardess what she had meant about Mr Brabant, but the look on the man's face stopped her. Though it was hard to tell his exact expression through all the bad plastic surgery he was obviously in love with the kind stewardess, and wished to be alone with her.

Feeling wistful, Nellie returned to her seat. Sally had been busy decorating the window with feces, and she gave Nellie a jaunty little wave. The stink was the vilest, tonsil-rubbing kind, and Nellie went into her purse for the mint-smelling chest plaster. She groped past the ampoules of insulin, caressed the blue curve of the Vicks Vapo-Rub, then found herself withdrawing the soft, oft-folded bit of paper that lived at the very bottom of the bag. *Sunset House*, it read. *Care for the Disadvantaged Elderly*. She knew the number by heart, but Nell kept the paper close to the insulin, to remind her that death was better than a bad life lived on someone else's dime.

She worried they wouldn't let Sally have her crochet hooks at the home. She worried they wouldn't change Sally's clothing, that they would park her in some piss-smelling corridor until at last she died of neglect. She worried that Mr Brabant wouldn't come with her on visiting days, that maybe he wouldn't want her to go either.

The piece of paper was as soft as a shroud.

"This is it, then," said Nan. "The final pass."

"Don't be afraid, Cupcake."

Some of the passengers were moaning. Portia and Minn were laughing in each other's arms, and the co-pilot was praying over the loud speaker.

Franklin's crimson eyes burned like twin suns.

"Why should I be afraid?" said Nan, sniffing. "Everyone on this

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crappy flight is just a little bit different now. We'll pop out the other side, and get to the business of living."

"You're amazing," Franklin stroked her hand reverently. "I could watch you forever. You're so unpredictable, Nan."

There was something in his tone that made Nanette blush to her roots despite the terror crawling along her scalp. "I am not. I'm the same as everyone here, only I'm predictable in my unpredictability." She sniffled. "There's something you're not telling me, you louse. You don't want things to change."

The alien shifted, searching for a way to hedge the answer. "You know, I never claimed to be a saint."

There was a click and a crackle as the captain's voice rang out. "Please put away your tray tables and bring your seats to the fully upright and locked position. In five minutes, we will activate an emergency tone, which will be your cue to assume the crash position. May God have mercy on us all."

Obeying a sudden compulsion, Nan reached into Franklin's pocket and drew out his ballpoint pen. Like a tired old woman placing her feet on the pedals of a bicycle she took hold of it, top and bottom, and prepared to give it a twist.

Franklin stopped her. "I want to stay. I'd hoped you would forget that part. I always hope you'll forget that part."

She took him by the lapel and shook him. "This isn't a roller coaster with unlimited rides. You've got to get out of here. You're not doomed like the rest of us!"

He took her hands and pressed them against his pale alien face. "Baby, I'm just as doomed as anyone. I heard about this pocket from a friend –" he laughed "– and it seemed like such a perfect way to go out, you know? A nice cocktail, a nice steak, a good view, then goodbye misery. It only took me one cycle to realize I couldn't stay dead, and one more to realize everything I need in life is right here."

The emergency tone sounded, and Nanette checked her seat belt. She felt the deceleration of the aircraft as it emerged from the long holding pattern in preparation for the descent and felt her heart take a turn. "I try to stop this every time?"

Franklin pressed his lipless mouth tight. "Sometimes you slap Hector and call him an asshole. Sometimes you steal Seth's pills and drug the entire cabin. Once, you got everyone blitzed, even the old ladies, and took off your clothes in the aisle to a ballsy rendition of Cole Porter's 'Let's Do It.'"

Nanette felt her face; it was hot. "Was I good?"

"The best." Franklin made a magician's pass and produced the pen. "We've been here before, Nan, so many times. There's only one thing you haven't tried." Franklin's voice was rough. "If anyone deserves to get out of here, it's you. Just – blow a hard breath right here." He indicated the place. "Give a hard twist on the barrel, and away you go into a whole new world."

"We could both go."

"Only enough power for a single being," Franklin shrugged. "I don't mind staying. I'm not much use out there in the world." He made the twirling gesture, around and around. "But you. You belong out there, moving and shaking, and changing the universe. You could see alien talk shows you wouldn't believe."

Nanette made a magician's pass and let the alien transport device slide down into her sleeve. Then she mimed an explosion, making Franklin burble a laugh-cry like a wounded child allowing itself to be cheered.

"This is the show I've been waiting for." She touched his face. "The queen of trailer trash and the alien from outer space are going to save the universe." She dragged Franklin into the crash position, and with her ear pressed to her wool skirt, Nan gave him a dazzling TV smile. "I'll be seeing you, Magic Man."

Franklin gave a wistful sigh and closed all three crimson eyes. In the juddering moment just before impact, he traced a circle in the palm of Nan's hand. ✧

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A WICKED BEAUTY! SIMON CLARK

STATIC



# WILL MCINTOSH

# STREET HERO

“Slow your roll, Slinky, we ain’t walking you down,” I shouted as Slinky’s skinny, cheekless ass disappeared around the red brick corner.

Did everyone who talked street talk think in perfect TV news anchorman English, I wondered, or was it just me? I also wondered if other people thought about shit like this, or whether I was some sort of street philosopher.

I glanced at Dice; he was licking the edges of his newly-grown mustache, which he’d been doing nonstop since he grew the fucker. It didn’t appear that he was wondering about anything at all, but how did I know he wasn’t working Euclidian geometry problems behind those beady eyes?

“Hey, appears we got us some buckwilders,” Slinky said, pointing out a couple sitting in the back seat of an old Toyota parked across Broughton. Didn’t look like they were buckwilding to me; they were just sitting, the woman with her arm around her man’s shoulder.

Slinky scampered over, peered in the window, his hands cupped around his face to block the glare. “Shit!” he screamed, leaping away from the car like he’d burned himself, pulling on the mask dangling around his neck.

“What is it?” I asked, pulling on my own mask and squatting down to look in the window for myself. The dude was dead. His jutting tongue was swollen to three times its normal size, his sinuses and adenoids bulging like there were water balloons under his skin. Some sort of designer virus, for sure.

The woman had it too – she looked like a basset hound. Her eyes were closed, her breathing labored. She was just sitting with her man, waiting to die, practicing good virus etiquette with the windows cranked up tight in the blistering heat. Broke my heart, but there was nothing I could do. I was no doctor, I was a street philosopher.

“C’mon, Hooper said the executions were gonna start around ten,” Dice said. Most of the time execution rumors turned out to be bogus anyway, I didn’t see the hurry.

We cut through Pulaski Square, right near my apartment house. Twenty or thirty vagrants were making a camp in the square. I’d never seen such destitute people in my life. You couldn’t even call what they were wearing rags – more like patches, pieces of material stitched together, half the time not even covering the spots that need covering. There was a teenage girl with her tits just hanging. She was probably good-looking, but she was so filthy the sight didn’t turn me on in the least. All the men had bum-beards and long hair, probably crawling with bugs.

They were chopping low-hanging branches off the live oaks and leaning

ILLUSTRATED BY  
CHRIS NURSE







them against the base of the Monument to make lean-to shelters.

"That kills me," I said. "Makes me sick to my stomach, seeing that beautiful square corrupted like that."

"Somebody should call the berries on them," Slinky said, snickering.

"They'd have to be hacking limbs off toddlers before the public police would come correct," Dice said, glancing at me to get some appreciation for his wit.

A skeleton of an old lady was pulling Spanish moss off branches to fire the cooking pots. This display was giving me indigestion. That moss was what gave Savannah its particularity; I loved the way it made the trees look like they were melting.

I pulled my Escrima sticks out of my sock, tucked them into the front of my pants where they'd be nice and visible. Experience has taught me that just displaying exotic weaponry causes people to give pause. Any asshole, no matter how stupid, knows to stay away from a guy carrying Escrima sticks or nunchuks. Chances are if you're carrying them, you know how to fucking use them. And I do know how to fucking use them.

Dice glanced down at the sticks. "You anticipating blood and guts?"

"I just want to have a talk. I ain't going to put up with this desecration."

We crossed the street and wandered along the brick walkway, through the center of their camp. When we hit the end of the square,

we doubled back, expecting someone to challenge us, tell us to get lost, but they just went on doing what they were doing. Finally, we approached the biggest and strongest guy.

"Ho," he said, smiling and nodding.

"Where you coming from?" I asked, hands on hips so he could get a good look at the sticks. Dice and Slinky hovered behind me.

"Bamboo forests to the West," he said, pointing. He had a peculiar accent; bamboo sounded like bumpoo. His beard was so shaggy I could barely see his mouth, his skin leathered from too much sun.

"You mean the sacrifice zone past Rincon and Pooler?"

"I don't know towns. West. Good hunting there."

"Good *hunting*? What the fuck do you hunt in the bamboo?" Dice and Slinky laughed.

As if on cue, there was a squeal in the grass behind us. A squirrel twisted on the ground, a little wooden arrow jutting from its side. The girl with the bare tits ran to it, squatted, and brained it with a half-brick. She picked it up by the tail and took it to a steaming pot.

"Shit, that's just malodorous," Slinky said, lips pulled back from his big square teeth.

The guy just shrugged. "What's those?" he asked, pointing at my Escrima sticks.

Now we were getting somewhere.

"Weapons," I said, pulling them out and assuming an offensive pose. I launched into Su Ki Kai kata, filling the air with blurry sticks, sometimes veering decidedly close to the vagrant. He flinched, but kept on smiling. I expected the other vagrants to stop what they were doing and watch, but only my mates watched. When I finished, the guy dropped his hands back to his sides and nodded vaguely.

I had figured on a circle of spectators, a little awe in their eyes, and I felt pretty fucking stupid now, the way they'd ignored me.

"You mind taking it easy on those branches?" I said to the guy, still breathing hard, wiping sweat from my eyes.

He squinted, shook his head like he didn't understand.

"The tree branches, would you mind not cutting them?"

"It won't kill the trees," he said.

"It looks bad."

He stared up at the trees, then back at me like I was whacked. Suddenly I wanted to concave this guy's skull. I loved those trees, the way their gnarled branches formed shady roofs over the streets. And how tough they were – they survived the climate shifts and chemical attacks while the crape-myrtles and azalea, the songbirds, those little green frogs that stuck to windows, they all died. They turned brown or blue and rotted. Brown and blue, the real colors of death. What moron made black the color of death? Black's the color of night, and the potential of a cool breeze.

"Just don't cut any more branches, okay?" I turned without waiting for an answer. I figured I'd made my point with the Escrima sticks. Nobody'd watched my performance, but they'd seen it. Word would spread through their shabby ranks that the trees had a champion, a protector. Kilo Orange, champion of the oaks. I liked that.

We soldiered on to Jackson Square, and sure enough there was a crowd gathered, and executions were in progress. The DeSoto Police – 'Mayor' Adams' thug-force – was conducting them. Three or four other 'Mayors' had control over smaller sections of the city. The fed seemed to be completely out of the picture at this point; likely the good Uncle was focusing on keeping control of the big cities. Word was you could still buy sealed brand soft drinks in Atlanta.

A fat police thug with a flat top shoved a targeted gas-gun – the kind with a black mask on the end of the barrel – into the screaming face of an old blue-haired lady while two gasmasked DeSotos held her. The gun squealed; the old lady went stiff as a board, then dropp-



ed to the cobblestones, twitching and jerking like all the muscles in her body had spasmed at once (which they had).

"Wicked shit," Dice said with a mix of disgust and excitement in his voice. "She probably figured she was gonna die of a heart ailment or something."

White foam gushed out of her mouth, spewing five feet, hissing and steaming on the pavement.

"What the fuck could that old bag have done to deserve that?" I said, pointing. It was sick, standing there watching people get gassed; I knew it, but I did it anyway. I don't know why. Boredom, I guess.

"It's what you say, not what you do," Dice said.

"True," I said. "And what you know." Right now Savannah wasn't a healthy place for overly-educated types, especially the type who wrote articles for the underground rags, or made milk-crate speeches in the squares.

"The wolves are always at the doors," Slinky added as the DeSotos picked up the old lady's body, carried it to a flatbed truck, and tossed it on top of a pile of twisted corpses.

"This isn't right! This isn't right!" a dude with out of date two-pocket pants and a button-down shirt shouted from the bunch still waiting to be gassed. A DeSoto chopped him in the neck with the butt of his gun; he fell into the dude in front of him, grabbed hold of him to keep from falling.

I recognized the guy! He'd been a teacher at my school. Mr Swift, my English teacher in 8th grade. He'd been a nice guy, took a liking to me.

He looked toward the crowd. "Somebody help us. Somebody stop this." Nobody moved.

Then he looked right at me. I looked away.

"Kilo? Please. Help me." Six, seven years later and he still remembered me.

Dice asked me if I knew the guy, and I told him who he was. I wished there was something I could do, but I just stood there, watching them pull people from the little crowd of impromptu condemned until it was Mr Swift's turn. My heart thudded as I watched, afraid to say anything, not wanting to get added to the line. "This isn't right! Kilo..." Mr Swift shouted as they dragged him out.

He got a face full of the vapors and went into rictus overdrive.

Poor Mr Swift. There wasn't a bad bone in him. The wolves were always at the door, that was the truth, and you needed street balls to keep them at bay.

I didn't want to see any more, so I told Dice and Slinky I had to bounce – that I needed to put in a few hours hauling dirt to the roof of my apartment house for our security garden, so my old man would stop toasting my biscuits about me not contributing.

There was a dog dying in the gutter outside our apartment house, flies buzzing around its eyes, its lip pulled back in a death snarl. It was a puny thing, mostly ribs. The eye facing up fixed on me, then started to go unfocused. Its little chest stopped rising and falling. Now it would turn blue.

A wave of hopelessness pounded me so hard I sank to the curb, pressed my palm on the hot, gum-stained pavement.

Was this it? Twenty-four years old, and I was still beating the sidewalks with my mates like I was fifteen, sitting in that sauna apartment staring at the TV when we could get a signal, hauling sacks of dirt to the roof to try to keep from starving. There was nothing ahead, nothing but heat and boredom, viruses and bamboo. Then I'd turn blue.

I'd been meant for more than this. Mr Swift had said I had a great mind, I had raw intellect. If I'd been born in an earlier time, before the world started going to shit, before people learned how to cook

viruses in their basements and you needed boats to navigate the streets of Los Angeles, I could've been great, I could've been a legend at something. A writer, or an inventor. A doctor. Yeah. My patients would pass me in the streets and shake my hand and say "You saved my life." Now I was just one step above those vermin in the park.

I looked up at my apartment building, the rusted black bars on the windows, vinyl siding broken off in places, exposing splintered plywood underneath. I couldn't stand the thought of going into that apartment, facing my pop's sarcastic bullshit. I saluted the little fallen dog and walked on, past the row houses with their busted railings and rotting wood, trash piled up on the sidewalk where it'd been thrown out the windows.

Maybe I should claim a gang, make some cheese selling drugs. At least they were doing something. It wasn't my style, though. All that hierarchy shit, paying props to higher-ups, secret hand signals.

I caught a whiff of the river as I turned onto Jefferson Street. Even ten blocks away, when the wind was right the stench of dead seafood and ammonia cut right through the city's default smell of piss on brick.

I stepped around a group of sleeping homeless people, spilling out of an alley onto the sidewalk. I passed the coffee shop, the Dog's Ear book store.

I paused, backtracked to the window of the bookstore. The display was mostly gardening, DIY manuals, cookbooks, but there were a few others: *Existential Philosophy: An Introduction*, *Socialism Revisited*, *Light of the Warrior-Sage*.

Mr Swift had told me that even though I couldn't afford high school, whatever I did, keep reading. Educate myself. I hadn't done it, unless you count martial arts magazines and the newspaper. Maybe I should do it, to honor his memory. It was something, anyway.

The book store was closed. I went into the alley, stepping between the vagrants sleeping out the heat of the day, and kicked in the back door. I used a spinning side kick, even though a shoulder would've worked just as well. I'm a show-off, I admit it. Even when no one's around I show off to myself.

I opened the blinds on a side window and held books up to read the titles by the sunlight streaking through. Most of the dusty books were in heaps on the floor, but they were still pretty much sorted by classification. I didn't know what I was looking for anyway, just stuff to expand my mind that was not too boring.

I looked around the place once my eyes had adjusted to the dimness. Rough wooden beams and fat pipes ran the length of the ceiling. Pipes. Blows my mind that most of the water that filled them used to be drinkable. Not many people know that, but I do. I don't count ignorance a strength.

I dug around in Anthropology, tossing titles over my shoulder, stacking a few interesting ones to the side. I thought I'd like to learn about peoples.

My buddies would give me shit if they caught me reading, but I could fight better than any of them; that gave me idiosyncrasy credits that I could cash in at the bookstore.

I found some Batman and Detective comics. Old musty ones, probably from the turn of the century, the pages yellow and brittle. I added them to my stack. I could mix them in with the hard stuff as a break.

The last thing I grabbed was *Light of the Warrior-Sage*, from out of the window. I like that phrase, warrior-sage. I found a plastic bag behind the counter, stuffed the books into it, and I was on my way to higher education.

When no one was watching I pulled open the steel cellar hatch in the sidewalk in front of a burned-out storefront. I ducked down



the steep staircase, crossed a damp basement, pushed out another hatch, and popped out into my secret place – a little courtyard surrounded by four-story walls which shaded the tiled floor most of the day. Used to be part of a bar, many years ago. I pulled down the mattress that was leaned up against one wall, spread out my books and lay down.

I tried to read *Twelfth Night* by Shakespeare, but couldn't get absorbed, so I thumbed through *Introduction to Anthropology*. A picture caught my eye, because all the women in it had their tits showing, even the old women, which was not particularly exciting but still sort of fascinating to look at. I started reading about the people in the picture.

They were a primitive tribe called the Hazda, that was still alive in Africa when the book was written. They were hunter-gatherers – they wandered from place to place with no home base, eating what they could hunt or gather instead of planting crops. The book said this made them think about the world way different from us. They weren't too interested in owning things, because they had to carry everything they owned. They didn't fight, because they didn't own anything to fight about, and no one was in charge, because there was nothing to be in charge of. They had no appointments to keep, so they didn't need clocks (not that I had any appointments to keep either), and they loved nature, because they were right in the middle of it all the time.

It occurred to me that the picture caught my eye partially because the women walking around with their tits showing reminded me of the girl in Pulaski Square who had brained the squirrel.

I wondered if those people in the square weren't just homeless vagrants – maybe they were hunter-gatherers, like the Hazda. Maybe they'd gone feral, because of the depression and the die-off. There was something strange about them, that was for sure.

I read all about the Hazda. Later, I'd go back to the square and talk to those people, see if they had fights, or clocks. Set all the pieces in their place. I felt absolutely plush, like lights were turning on inside my head.

I figured that was enough hypothesizing for one day, so I gathered up my gear and headed home. I was ready to haul some dirt.

From a block away I could hear the cracking, like ice underfoot, or twigs snapping. "Oh shit. Oh shit," I said to no one. I ran.

It was the yellow variety – not as bad as the green, but worse than the black – and it was coming up right outside our apartment house. Some of the stalks were already five feet tall, trembling with energy, cracking and popping as they grew. The asphalt in the road was broken into a thousand fragments as nubs of new stalks pushed through. A fucking bamboo outbreak. How the hell did it get inside the rhizome barrier that'd been sunk around all of downtown Savannah? That barrier went down ten feet. It made no sense.

Private police (I didn't recognize their insignia, but new forces were being established every day) had cordoned off the area. Technicians were already at work, tearing up the street with road-eaters, trying to set up a rhizome barrier to contain the bamboo before it spread out of control.

Our apartment house was inside the perimeter they were setting up. Inside the sacrifice zone. I'd lived there for ten years, and just like that, they were letting the bamboo have it.

I spotted pop, standing in a crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk. He was shaking his head, making angry gestures at no one in particular. At God probably.

"No way this made it through the barrier," he said when I was in earshot. "God damned biotech punks carried it in and planted it,

I'm telling you. Or terrorists – damned Jumpy-Jumps."

I nodded. The adolescent bio-tinkerer who'd loosed it – probably to impress his friends – felt it wasn't getting enough attention, so he hacked it into the safe zone. "You seen Edie or Pat yet?" They lived in the apartment next door. Though not anymore they didn't.

"Nah," he said. "What do you got there?" he added, pointing at my books.

"Nothing. Just some books."

"We got no time for books," he grumbled, walking off. "Start moving stuff out of there while we can still get through. We're homeless." His voice cracked on the last word.

We slept at my uncle Troy's, two blocks away on East Harris. I slept in the kitchen, between the counter and the table, because there were already three to a bedroom and two in the living room. Three of them were boarders Troy had taken on to help make ends meet. It was hard to sleep with the sound of bamboo snapping and crackling in the distance – like trying to sleep to the sound of rats scuttling around in your ceiling – but it was too hot to close the kitchen window.

In the morning I went back to our place to assess the damage. A sea of yellow stalks waved in the hot breeze, loosely spread in some places, tight as a pack of cigarettes in others. It ended short of Pulaski Square, so the barrier had held.

I wandered into Pulaski Square, where the tribe was still camped, and watched them for a few minutes. They certainly didn't have many possessions: machetes, cooking pots; one kid was clutching an old action figure doll. From what I could see, no one seemed to be in charge. Most of them were sprawled on the lawn dozing; a group of older men were playing some sort of gambling game that involved tossing carved sticks.

I sat on a bench, pulled *Light of the Warrior-Sage* out of my pack, and opened it at random. *The warrior-sage keeps a silent quest in his heart. This quest keeps him vital, lubricates his mind and spirit, keeps him poised and alert in the luminosity of his soul. His quest is selfless, for the warrior-sage recognizes that the boundary between self and world is illusion, that alleviating the suffering of the world and alleviating the suffering in his own heart are one and the same.*

A calmness spread through me. I put the book down beside me and stared up into the branches of the oaks, letting the idea wash over me. It was like the words were always inside me, waiting to come out. A warrior-sage – I was a warrior sage.

I picked up the book and started from the beginning.

I learned that the warrior sage spoke only the truth, not because of some arbitrary moral code, because the truth insulated you from falling prey to the rolling mirror, the illusions that coated the world and were always changing. The warrior-sage respected all life. He practiced a quiet dignity; his feet planted firmly on the earth, his vision that of the great eastern sun.

My phone rang.

"Kilo!" It was Dice. "You in there? I was coming to pay a call, and found the terrain no longer to my liking."

"Props, Dice. You looking to practice some downtown science on this fine day?" I retrieved a Batman comic, flipped through it while we talked about nothing. On the splash page Batman was going Kung Fu on a gang in a back alley while a blonde woman cowered against a concrete wall. He wasn't saving her from getting gang-banged, was he? That'd be intense for a comic. I'd always liked Batman. He would sure pull a full shift if he were working in these times...

I jumped off the bench. "Dice, I gotta bounce, man, I'll ring you after." My heart was racing. All that time honing my martial arts



skills, my weapons technique... I'd no idea where it was leading. It was leading to this moment.

I threw a flurry of punches in the air and whooped.

"Where are your sticks?" I turned around; it was the topless girl who could have been hot if she wasn't sporting that filthy hillbilly look and had better teeth. Her accent was like the dude I'd talked with yesterday – she pronounced W like V.

"I left them at home," I said. If I could call uncle Troy's kitchen home.

"What game were you playing with them?" She made a strange, scrunchy facial expression, like she wasn't aware other people could see her face.

"It wasn't a game. They're weapons, for protection."

She made a grunting noise that I took to mean she understood. I kept glancing down at her chest; I couldn't help it, her boobs were right there. Her nipples were puckered, her areolas as big as silver dollar pancakes.

"If you see any trouble, let me know. I'm a protector, like the police, only I don't charge money. I'm a protector for the poor."

She frowned, like she didn't understand, then looked off over my shoulder, at the bamboo outbreak. She smiled, suddenly looking almost like any city chick except for her crooked grey teeth.

"It's beautiful," she said. Love of nature shit, just like the Hazda. God damn if these people weren't modern hunter-gatherers.

I dressed all in black, to blend in with the night. No fancy costume. The warrior-sage is humble; he does not seek attention. I strapped a sheathed knife at my calf, Escrima sticks in a pouch at my waist, nine millimeter mule pistol tucked in the big cargo pocket of my otherwise skintight pants. I'd made a mask out of an old T-shirt, but would only wear it when action was immanent.

The sun was setting, the crickets singing in the waning heat. My first night as a crime fighter, my first night as a true warrior-sage. I was excited, yet calm. I felt ten feet tall, all my senses on fire, as I turned off East Harris and cut across Pulaski Square.

The tribe was still there, hunkered down on the lawn in groups of three or four, talking, laughing, sleeping. No TVs, no phones. I waved at the topless girl, who smiled and waved back over-enthusiastically.

On Broughton I climbed a fire escape and took to the roofs, hopping across the low walls between the attached buildings, out of sight, scanning the streets for crime.

The vagrants were about now that the sun was down. An Asian woman stood on the corner in a faded green felt skirt, looking to turn tricks, her children sitting at her feet playing with bottle caps. One of her arms was nothing but bone and scar tissue; she'd danced with the flesh-eating virus that surfaced back in fifty-five. But she survived it, lucky lady, unlike my mother and a few million others.

A bunch of uniforms were standing outside the boarded-up Lucky 7 mini-casino checking IDs, probably for no reason except to exert their authority.

All seemed well and correct. I exited the roofs into an alley, headed down to River Street.

An old tour trolley, stripped down to wheels and a floor, rumbled by on the uneven cobblestone of River Street.

"Right over there, a particularly bloody Stiletto went down," some red haired dude in an old navy jacket said into a crackly microphone. "Dude stabbed another dude seven, eight times in the face, till his blade got stuck in the eye socket and he couldn't get it back out."

"Where's the harm in that?" Slinky shouted from the back of the trolley, a bottle of home-brew clutched in one fist. I stepped behind

a telephone pole, watched the murder tour roll by. Tonight I didn't want to be seen.

I stayed in the shadows, hawking the doors and windows of the bars for signs of trouble.

Around midnight, I sat on a bench overlooking the river, watched detritus float by, hoping someone would try to roll me. Not much likelihood of that; the criminal element didn't much bother dudes with iron biceps who were armed to the nines.

A tug boat hooted in the distance; overhead a bat flapped mad figure-eights around a lamppost.

I sighed. It was more difficult than I thought to find a crime in progress. If this didn't work, what then? Hop on the trolley and take the murder tour? Get drunk? Lay pipe with the local sluts? I needed to kick-start my career as a warrior-sage, or I was going to lose heart, sink back into the illusion of the rolling mirror.

Two dudes stumbled past me, one wobbling dangerously close to the dropoff into the river. "Look at the moon! It's glowing in the dark!" he said, pointing. The other cackled. Stoners shot up with something, probably Soma.

It occurred to me that there was one place I was guaranteed to find a crime in progress. I'd been thinking violent crime, open wounds, but there were subtler crimes that might interest a warrior-sage. I'd done my share of drugs, but selling them, that was no service to the community. I got off my ass. Time to pay a visit to a certain burned-out storefront on Abercorn.

From behind a parked car I surveyed the scene. It was essentially an empty lot, tucked between two buildings, but the tile flooring and some of the fixtures were still intact. Blackened bricks and heat-deformed steel lay scattered and piled, casting long shadows. Weeds jutted through cracks in the floor.

B-Bob sat on stool behind a bruised Formica counter, his back to the brick wall of an adjoining building. A chick leaned up against the wall, arms crossed behind her back, purse dangling from her shoulder, talking to him.

I pulled on my mask, slunk among the piles of debris, blending into the darkness like a cat.

"She's got some train wreck going on at her place," the chick was saying as I approached undetected. I recognized her: Allie Cohn. I'd gone to school with her.

When I was so close I could smell Allie's licorice chewing gum, I stood, brandishing the nine millimeter. "Freeze," I said.

Allie shrieked; B-Bob nearly fell back in his stool. I lunged, grabbed the automatic pistol sitting on the counter, stuffed it into my belt.

"Take it, take it," B-Bob said, his hands in the air. "We got no problem."

"Yeah, we do got a problem," I said. "I'm the new law in this town. Tell all your buddies that the Warrior-sage is patrolling, and he's closing down all the candy stores. Put everything out on the table. Now."

Hands shaking, B-Bob pulled piles of baggies and bright-colored pills out from behind the counter, laid them on top. Then he put his hands back up.

I pushed the drugs into a pile, pulled a little can of lighter fluid from my pocket, and squirted it over the drugs.

"What the fuck? You just going to flunk them all?" Allie asked. B-Bob just stared at the pile, wide-eyed.

"I ain't no thief," I said, fishing a matchbook from my pants. "This shit wrecks the city. All you bastards bleeding the block, you just make a bad situation worse. I'm putting a stop to it."

"I don't sell to kids," B-Bob said. "I don't do no harm, I just help



people escape for a little while. It's the only vacation most people around here can afford."

I heard a metal click behind my ear.

"Drop the gun," a voice behind me said.

Real slow, I put my hands up, turned halfway around until I could see the guy. Then I planted a side kick under his armpit, followed by a spinning hook kick that caught him square-on in the jaw and dropped him.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl fumble in her purse and pull something out. As I spun to face her she pointed a pistol at me, clutching it in both hands.

"No!" I shouted as she drew a bead. "Put it *down*!" I pointed my pistol at her. She hesitated, then closed one eye like she was at a fucking rifle range.

I shot her twice in the gut. She grunted, fell back into a sitting position, stared down in disbelief at the blood, which looked black in the dim streetlight.

"You suck," she said.

"I'm sorry. You should have listened. I didn't want to hurt anyone," I babbled.

"Bobby," she whimpered. "I need help. It's starting to hurt." She gagged, and a wave of blood poured out of her mouth and down her chin. Bobby squatted beside her, drew her head to his chest.

I ran. I never ran so fast. I stopped not because I was out of breath, but because I couldn't see through the tears. I stopped in a deserted alley, pulled off the mask, pushed my face against the bricks. My sobs echoed off the walls.

What the fuck had I done? I'd shot Allie Cohn, who used to sit in front of me in biology class. For what? For what reason? I could still hear her, in shock, telling me I sucked, like I'd taken her last french fry or something.

At that moment I couldn't stand being in my own fucking skin. I wanted to put the gun in my mouth and pull the trigger.

I walked. I stared up at the Spanish moss dripping from the branches of the oaks, the moonlight peering through. I walked until daylight.

By morning I'd stopped crying, but I still felt so twisted up inside it was hard to take a full breath. I wandered into Pulaski Square. The tribe was breaking camp. The girl waved when she saw me, and I realized I hadn't even asked her name, like she was an animal not worth that courtesy. This morning she looked strong and certain, like she was the one who had it right, who knew how to live, and I was the clueless dink. "I don't know your name," I said, trying to smile.

"Bird," she said.

"Kilo."

"I like you," she said, staring at the ground, looking like a fourteen-year-old with a crush. It occurred to me that I didn't know she *wasn't* a fourteen-year-old, but it felt so good to have someone say something nice to me just then that I didn't care.

"I like you, too," I said. My eyes teared; I blinked the tears away.

"Why don't you come with me?"

"I..." I was going to tell her I couldn't, but then I saw myself in the bamboo forest, hunting, sleeping, raising children with Bird, teaching them to survive. No more guns, no more viruses, nothing to think about. Noble savagery. "Would they let me?"

"Would who let you?" Bird asked.

"Your...peoples. Who would I ask?"

Bird shrugged, squinted. "Why would you ask anybody?"

No one in charge. I forgot.

Two naked kids ran between us, giggling, one chasing the other.

"I'd like to come with you," I said.

Bird squealed with excitement, jumped up and down. She grabbed my arm, led me to a little pile: a cooking pot, bow and arrow, machete, a black plastic bag tied with a string. "These are our things. Will you carry our machete and bow and arrows?"

I nodded, picked them up. Bird grabbed the other things, and we left the square. Just like that.

We hiked out of Savannah. By afternoon I was drenched in sweat and exhausted. I hadn't slept in thirty hours, and I'd shot a girl since then, probably killed her.

We reached the foot-high plastic wall that marked the perimeter of the outer rhizome barrier, and pressed into the bamboo. It was like another world. In most places the stalks were so tight that you had to squeeze between them; you chose your path like you were in a maze, trying to look ahead, avoid the areas where you had to hack with the machete, seeking out the more open areas where you could walk normally. The kids had an easier time of it; not only were they smaller, but they moved like they were born to it, which they probably were.

There was a constant cracking, like ice breaking all around. The cracking seemed to rise and fall, louder, then softer, but that may have been in my head. The long, narrow striped leaves added a dry rustling whisper to the cracking sound when the wind blew.

It was hard for me not to think of the bamboo as a rat-plant, something repulsive, but I had to admit it was beautiful in its way. There were birds and squirrels and other little animals everywhere – they seemed to be right at home. I'd thought most of the animals had died out, or almost, but they seemed to be thriving here.

When we camped for the night I called my old man. He told me I was a fucking moron, that it sounded like I'd joined a cult, and my ass would be back on his doorstep when I got tired of playing Tarzan and needed a fucking shower. Great guy, my pop.

It was a 'one-night' camp, which meant we found a reasonably open spot, all put our shit down, sat on the ground, and we were camped. A few people went off to hunt. Bird took my hand and led me a little ways off, and we screwed for the first time. She was pretty good – it was obviously not her first time. Her breath was bad, and by then I guess mine was too, so I didn't kiss her much. But it felt good and natural, fucking in the wilderness, and no one in the tribe looked at me like I'd done something wrong when we rejoined them. No religion bullshit, no guilt.

They weren't playing at this. It was like they didn't know how to think in the regular way anymore.

Dinner was rank: squirrel, bird, wild onions and blackberries, but I ate without complaining. I wasn't gonna play the role of soft city boy. After dinner, people cut themselves bamboo stalks and scraped out the sugar from inside (I guess that was dessert) while Sandra, the white-haired skeleton of an old lady, told a story. I recognized the story – it was a bastardized version of an old movie from the thirties, *King of Our Engine*. Good flick, so-so in story form.

I wondered what was in the garbage bag Bird had been carrying, so I grabbed it and pulled it over to me. I was starting to get the hang of this place; you didn't ask permission to use other people's stuff, you just took it if you wanted it. They were like communists. I untied the bag and peered inside. It was filled with little bamboo shoots, with black and white striped stalks and gold-colored leaves, the roots wrapped tightly in burlap. What the hell? I'd never seen this variety before. Maybe that's why Bird had taken them, because they were unique and attractive? I couldn't ask Bird now, because I didn't want to talk while the old lady was telling her story, so I sat cross-legged and listened. A little girl, two or three years old, came over and sat in my lap. She threw her head back and looked up



at me, grinning, and I ruffled her hair. She giggled. I couldn't tell whose kids were whose – they wandered from person to person like they were happy orphans.

When the story was finished, I thought I'd start up a conversation. "So how long have you been doing this?"

"What?" said the strong-looking guy we'd approached in the park that first day.

"Living in the wilderness, not living in houses."

"Most of us a long time, a few a shorter time," Sandra piped in. "The children, their whole lives. We don't talk about our city lives much. We prefer happy stories." She didn't sound pissed off at me for bringing it up, just matter-of-fact.

"So why do you visit the cities at all?" I asked.

"There are things we need there, and things we need to give to them," Carl said. He was a fifty-something guy with a weak chin. He didn't have as much of an accent as most of the others, so I guessed he was like me, a convert.

"You trade with them?"

A couple of people laughed.

"We give them what they need, we get what we need," Carl said.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I said. "You speaking in riddles because my ignorance is entertaining, or because you don't want to tell me? If you don't want to tell me, just say so."

Some of the smiles faded; a few people picked up weaving projects and other shit they were working on.

Carl tossed his half-eaten bamboo shoot at my feet. "We give them these."

I picked it up, cradled it in my palms.

Shit, I can be slow on the uptake for a guy who's got so much raw intellect.

"You started the outbreak near the square?" I looked at Bird. She smiled like a gremlin and nodded so vigorously her tits bounced. "Why?"

Everyone looked to Carl. "To slow things down." He twisted around, cut another length of bamboo stalk, sliced it lengthwise with his hunting knife. "The world is coming apart, in case you haven't noticed. It's either gonna come apart hard, or soft. We're helping to make it soft."

People nodded as he spoke. Shit, this was sounding suspiciously like some whacked religion. What had I gotten myself into?

"How the hell do you know you're not making things worse? Excuse me, but I don't see many economists here, or sociologists, or environmental engineers!"

"No, you don't. But they pay us to spread their work."

It took a minute for that to sink in, then my mouth dropped open. "You're trying to tell me this shit was made on purpose, by educated people, and they pay you to spread it?"

Carl smiled. "Now you know."

I turned the piece of bamboo over and over in my hands, thinking. Another thing I was learning about these people was they were comfortable with silence. They were happy to sit and eat, or just sit. Long lulls in a conversation were not uncommon.

"We're not wandering aimlessly, are we?" I asked, finally.

"We're heading north," the big guy said. "To slow things down up there."

With a newly-engineered variety that would thrive further north, clogging the highways and airports, slowing the spread of brand-name products even more. Cutting down on pollution, making it harder for wars to be fought. Maybe throwing us back into the stone age. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

A week in, I had no fucking idea where we were. We reached the top of what passed for a hill in south Georgia, and there was nothing but bamboo and scattered stands of scrub pines as far as I could see in every direction. It would take months for us to make our way north, but the tribe didn't seem to be in any hurry. I was filthy, thirsty, and bored. Sand gnats buzzed around my face, landing in my ears and the corners of my eyes. I turned and waited for Bird. She was dragging, sweating even more than me, her mouth pulled down in a grimace that made her look stupid and confused. Usually she was egging me on.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I ate something wrong. I have to poop." She pulled down her rags and squatted right there. I was getting used to it. I turned and walked a respectable distance. Three dudes moseyed past, saying hello to her as she squatted there, her face red from straining.

Suddenly she turned her head to one side and puked. I ran to her, put a hand on her shoulder. "You're really sick." I put my palm on her forehead, and hot as it was outside, it was still obvious she was pulling a fever. "Shit, you've got something." I yanked my mask up over my mouth, knowing it was way too late if she'd caught anything designer. I thought of the woman with the giant tongue, panting in the car, and my bowels went loose. I turned in the direction of the guys vanishing into the bamboo. "Hey! She's sick! Call a stop."

They called, and the call repeated, further away each time. I wrapped my arms around her waist to help her to the ground. She cried out in pain, like I'd stuck an arrow in her or something, and grabbed her stomach, low, on the right side.

Appendix. As soon as I saw her grab that spot, I knew.

The tribe was slowly gathering, a few at a time.

"We need to find a doctor! She's got appendicitis." It had never occurred to me to wonder what would happen if I fell and fractured my skull while I was out here.

"No towns near here. No doctors," an old guy missing his front teeth said.

"Well what do we do?" I asked. I helped Bird ease herself to the ground. She was whimpering in pain.

"Nothing to do," Sandra said, shrugging. "We'll camp here till Bird's strong enough to walk, or she dies."

"I don't want to die," Bird said.

I needed a consult. I pulled out my phone, dialed the Phone Doctor number. A recorded voice prompted me to type in my credit code. I typed in my old man's.

"Andrew Gabow, MD. How can I help you?" a clean, rested voice said over the phone. I felt a wave of gratitude, just to hear that tone.

"I've got a woman here who I think has appendicitis. We're way out in the wilderness, there's no way to get her to a town. What do I do?"

"Describe her symptoms."

I went through them; the doctor asked follow up questions about the exact location of the pain in her abdomen. He sounded miffed that we didn't have a thermometer with us to get Bird's exact temperature.

"You're probably correct – acute appendicitis. I'll give it to you straight, Kilo – she's in grave danger. You're not going to carry her out of there in time, and when her appendix bursts, the infection will spread, and chances are she won't survive it. Not out there. Probably not even in a hospital."

"What do I do?" I asked.

"You've got one option. Perform surgery on her."

"Me?"

"Whoever in your party has the most medical experience. Is there



a nurse with you, a paramedic? Nurse's aid?"

I asked the tribe; a dozen heads shook in unison. Shit, half of them never learned how to read. Most of the rest had forgotten.

"There's got to be another way," I said to the doctor. "What about a helicopter?"

He laughed. "Will that be cash or charge?"

"Oh god, oh god," I said. I felt like I was separating from my body; I heard my voice saying "Oh god," but it sounded far away, coming from someone else.

"Build a fire," Dr Gabow said. "I'm going to do this for a hundred dollars federal, because you can't afford what I should be charging, and because I'm a nice guy."

"Thank you, doctor," I said, and started to cry. "Somebody build a fire!" *Who was that scared little boy who just yelled that?* a calm sliver of my mind asked.

When the fire had been built, we heated water. I plunged my hands into the pot of scalding water and held them there as long as I could. Then Carla did the same – she was going to assist. Carla put my knife in the water, then held it over the flames before handing it to me. My hand was shaking so bad I could hardly hold the knife. The children had been moved out of hearing distance. Four people held Bird down, one for each arm and leg. The doctor suggested we put her in a stream to cool her and reduce the bleeding, but there were no streams around.

"Don't make the cut too deep," the doctor said. I had activated the hands free element on the phone. "About a half inch down, two across. There's going to be a lot of blood, but don't worry about that. We'll handle that later."

Tears were pouring down Bird's cheeks as I held the knife over the spot we'd washed and doused with moonshine. The knife was shaking so hard it was blurry. I held it there a long time; twice I brought it down just short of her soft skin, and twice pulled it back up.

"Make the cut, Kilo," the doctor said.

"I can't do this," I said. "Somebody else, please. Somebody do this."

I'd been strutting around Savannah with all my street style, like I was this tough guy, but I was just a worm. I was all posture. I never shot or cut anyone in my life before I shot Allie Cohn. I couldn't even cut this girl to save her life.

"I don't want to die," Bird whimpered. "Please Kilo, please. I don't want to die."

With a howl, I cut her. She screamed in agony, bucked violently, trying to break free of the people pinning her down. Like an animal. Blood welled up where I'd cut her, filling the incision and pouring out. "I can't do this, I can't do this," I cried.

"How deep is the incision? What do you see inside?" the doctor said, so calm, so far away in his comfortable air-conditioned office.

"I don't know," I pulled the skin apart to see how deep it was. "There's just red tissue, I can't see anything."

"You're still in muscle. You have to cut again, deeper."

"Oh, god. Not again." Tears poured down my cheeks, and I was trembling all over, like I was freezing cold.

*You suck, Kilo,* Allie Cohn's voice said inside my head. I sobbed.

"Cut, god dammit. Cut her, do it now," the doctor shouted.

I screamed, and kept screaming as I cut, wider and deeper. Bird thrashed, but the fight was bleeding out of her. She seemed to be only half-conscious, only the whites of her eyes visible.

"What do you see?" the doctor asked.

I pulled on the flap I'd made, and it tore a little wider, exposing something grey and puckered, a fat snake folding in on itself. It was an organ. Christ, it was her liver or gall bladder or something. I des-

cribed it to the doctor.

"Good boy, Kilo, that's what you want. That's the colon. Fish around, find the bottom of it, where it meets the small intestine. You're looking for a small, tube-like appendage attached to the colon."

I poked around inside Bird, trying to ignore the moist squishing sound, the blood pouring down her side, dribbling onto the tan bamboo husks that littered the ground.

"I can't find it," I said.

"Get your damned hand in there and move the colon around. This isn't some dainty parlor game. Get your hands bloody."

I dug deeper, squeezing my fingers between the tubes, pushing one section up with my finger. Behind it was something that looked like a swollen maggot, I described it to Dr Gabow.

"Cut it off and pitch it away, Kilo."

After I cut it off, Sandra sewed the end of the colon closed while I held my knife over the flame, getting it good and hot. Then I pressed the flat end of it against the wound, to cauterize it and stop some of the bleeding. Bird didn't flinch as the knife hissed against her insides; she'd fainted somewhere along the way. I held the edges of the wound closed while Sandra sewed it. Dr Gabow explained that someone needed to get to the nearest town and buy antibiotics, or Bird would likely die of infection, and all my good work would go to waste.

People slapped my back as I stumbled out of the camp. I found myself a quiet copse and collapsed onto my back, staring up at the half moon through the narrow leaves. I felt...strange. Calm. Like a buzzing had turned off in my brain for the first time in years. I held my hands up in front of my face, looked at the blood covering them, starting to dry and cake now.

I had done something. And now that I'd done it once, I thought I could do it again, and that next time my hand wouldn't shake, and I wouldn't cry.

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A teenaged chick with tear stained eyes peered up through the open steel hatch, into my formerly secret Savannah hideaway. She held a crumpled T-shirt to her cheek; spots of blood had already seeped through it.

"Welcome," I said, putting away the medical book I'd been reading. No books needed to figure this one out – this one was easy.

"Joey Plano told me you could fix me up. I got no cheese, but I could pay you later, or –"

I held up my hand. "Pay is optional. Maybe later you want to give me something, maybe not. No grief either way. Let me see."

She came over, sat in the plastic chair facing me, pulled away the T-shirt. A nasty gash; looked like a knife, or a bottle.

"Where'd you get it?" I said, turning to choose a needle and thread.

"My boyfriend." She started crying. "The son of a bitch. My brother's gonna kill him, gonna cut his balls off and make him eat them."

"That'll serve him right, but right now I need you to stop talking and stop crying." I flicked my lighter, ran the needle over the flame. She reminded me a little bit of Bird, with her mouth all scrunched from crying. I wondered if Bird and her band had made it far enough north to plant their little surprise yet. Hard to know.

"Now I need you to hold still for me. This is gonna hurt."

I sunk the needle into her cheek; she squealed, but held still. ✧

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Will McIntosh's original story in this sequence, 'Soft Apocalypse' (issue 200), was shortlisted for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards for best short story of 2005. He also has a story in the current issue of our sister magazine *Black Static*. By day, Will is a psychology professor in the USA.



# the IMITATION GAME



It was a rainy Sunday night, June 6, 1954. Alan Turing was walking down the liquidly lamp-lit street to the Manchester train station, wearing a long raincoat with a furled umbrella concealed beneath. His Greek paramour Zeno was due on the 9pm coach, having taken a ferry from Calais. And, no, the name had no philosophical import, it was simply the boy's name. If all went well, Zeno and Alan would be spending the night together in the sepulchral Manchester Midland travelers' hotel – Alan's own home nearby was watched. He'd booked the hotel room under a pseudonym.

Barring any intrusions from the morals squad, Alan and Zeno would set off bright and early tomorrow for a lovely week of tramping across the hills of the Lake Country, free as rabbits, sleeping in serendipitous inns. Alan sent up a fervent prayer, if not to God, then to the deterministic universe's initial boundary condition.

"Let it be so."

Surely the cosmos bore no distinct animus towards homosexuals, and the world might yet grant some peace to the tormented, fretful gnat labeled Alan Turing. But it was by no means a given that the assignation with Zeno would click. Last spring, the suspicious authorities had deported Alan's Norwegian flame Kjell straight back to Bergen before Alan even saw him.

It was as if Alan's persecutors supposed him likely to be teaching his men top-secret code-breaking algorithms, rather than sensually savoring his rare hours of private joy. Although, yes, Alan did relish playing the tutor, and it was in fact conceivable that he might feel the urge to discuss those topics upon which he'd worked during the war years. After all, it was no one but he, Alan Turing, who'd been the brains of the British cryptography team at Bletchley Park, cracking the Nazi Enigma code and shortening the War by several years – little thanks that he'd ever gotten for that.

The churning of a human mind is unpredictable, as is the anatomy of the human heart. Alan's work on universal machines and computational morphogenesis had convinced him that the world is both deterministic *and* overflowing with endless surprise. His proof of the unsolvability of the Halting Problem had established, at least to Alan's satisfaction, that there could never be any shortcuts for predicting the figures of Nature's stately dance.

Few but Alan had as yet grasped the new order. The prating philosophers still supposed, for instance, that there must be some element of randomness at play in order that each human face be slightly different. Far from it. The differences were simply the computation-amplified results of disparities among the embryos and their wombs – with these disparities stemming in turn from the cosmic computation's orderly exfoliation of the universe's initial conditions.

Oflate Alan had been testing his ideas with experiments involving the massed cellular computations by which a living organism trans-

forms egg to embryo to adult. Input acorn; output oak. He'd already published his results involving the dappling of a brindle cow, but his latest experiments were so close to magic that he was holding them secret, wanting to refine the work in the alchemical privacy of his starkly under-furnished home. Should all go well, a Nobel prize might grace the burgeoning field of computational morphogenesis. This time Alan didn't want a droning gas-bag like Alonzo Church to steal his thunder – as had happened with the Hilbert *Entscheidungsproblem*.

Alan glanced at his watch. Only three minutes till the coach arrived. His heart was pounding. Soon he'd be committing lewd and lascivious acts (luscious phrase) with a man in England. To avoid a stint in jail, he'd sworn to abjure this practice – but he'd found wiggle room for his conscience. Given that Zeno was a visiting Greek national, he wasn't, strictly speaking, a 'man in England', assuming that 'in' was construed to mean 'who is a member citizen of'. Chop the logic and let the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil fall, soundless in the moldering woods.

It had been nearly a year since Alan had enjoyed manly love – last summer on the island of Corfu with none other than Zeno, who'd taken Alan for a memorable row in his dory. Alan had just been coming off his court-ordered estrogen treatments, and thanks to the lingering effects of the libido-reducing hormones, the sex had been less intense than one might wish. This coming week would be different. Alan felt randy as a hat rack; his whole being was on the surface of his skin.

Approaching the train station, he glanced back over his shoulder – reluctantly playing the socially assigned role of furtive perv – and sure enough, a weedy whey-faced fellow was mooching along half a block behind, a man with a little round mouth like a lamprey eel's. Officer Harold Jenkins. Devil take the beastly prig!

Alan twitched his eyes forward again, pretending not to have seen the detective. What with the growing trans-Atlantic hysteria over homosexuals and atomic secrets, the security minders grew ever more officious. In these darkening times, Alan sometimes mused that the United States had been colonized by the lowest dregs of British society: sexually obsessed zealots, degenerate criminals, and murderous slave masters.

On the elevated tracks, Zeno's train was pulling in. What to do? Surely Detective Jenkins didn't realize that Alan was meeting this particular train. Alan's incoming mail was vetted by the censors – he estimated that by now Her Majesty was employing the equivalent of two point seven workers full time to torment that disgraced boffin, Professor A.M. Turing. But – score one for Prof Turing – his written communications with Zeno had been encrypted via a sheaf of one-time pads he'd left in Corfu with his golden-eyed Greek god,



# by RUDY RUCKER

bringing a matching sheaf home. Alan had made the pads from clipped-out sections of identical newspapers; he'd also built Zeno a cardboard cipher wheel to simplify the look-ups.

No, no, in all likelihood, Jenkins was in this louche district on a routine patrol, although now, having spotted Turing, he would of course dog his steps. The arches beneath the elevated tracks were the precise spot where, two years ago, Alan had connected with a sweet-faced boy whose dishonesty had led to Alan's conviction for acts of gross indecency. Alan's arrest had been to some extent his own doing; he'd been foolish enough to call the police when one of the boy's friends burglarized his house. "Silly ass," Alan's big brother had said. Remembering the phrase made Alan wince and snicker. A silly ass in a dunce's cap, with donkey ears. A suffering human being nonetheless.

The train screeched to a stop, puffing out steam. The doors of the carriages slammed open. Alan would have loved to sashay up there like Snow White on the palace steps. But how to shed Jenkins?

Not to worry; he'd prepared a plan. He darted into the men's public lavatory, inwardly chuckling at the vile, voyeuristic thrill that disk-mouthed Jenkins must feel to see his quarry going to earth. The echoing stony chamber was redolent with the rich scent of putrefying urine, the airborne biochemical signature of an immortal colony of microorganisms indigenous to the standing waters of the train station pissoir. It put Alan in mind of his latest Petri-dish experiments at home. He'd learned to grow stripes, spots and spirals in the flat mediums, and then he'd moved into the third dimension. He'd grown tentacles, hairs, and, just yesterday, a conglomeration of tissue very like a human ear.

Like a thieves' treasure cave, the wonderful bathroom ran straight through to the other side of the elevated track – with an exit on the far side. Striding through the room's length, Alan drew out his umbrella, folded his mackintosh into a small bundle tucked beneath one arm, and hiked up the over-long pants of his dark suit to display the prominent red tartan spats that he'd worn, the spats a joking gift from a Cambridge friend. Exiting the jakes on the other side of the tracks, Alan opened his high-domed umbrella and pulled it low over his head. With the spats and dark suit replacing the beige mac and ground-dragging cuffs, he looked quite the different man from before.

Not risking a backward glance, he clattered up the stairs to the platform. And there was Zeno, his handsome, bearded face alight. Zeno was tall for a Greek, with much the same build as Alan's. As planned, Alan paused briefly by Zeno as if asking a question, privily passing him a little map and a key to their room at the Midland Hotel. And then Alan was off down the street, singing in the rain, leading the way.

Alan didn't notice Detective Jenkins following him in an unmarked car. Once Jenkins had determined where Alan and Zeno were bound, he put in a call to the security office at MI5. The matter was out of his hands now.

The sex was even more enjoyable than Alan had hoped. He and Zeno slept till mid-morning, Zeno's leg heavy across his, the two of them spooned together in one of the room's twin beds. Alan awoke to a knocking on the door, followed by a rattling of keys.

He sprang across the carpet and leaned against the door. "We're still asleep," he said, striving for an authoritative tone.

"The dining room's about to close," whined a woman's voice. "Might I bring the gentlemen their breakfast in the room?"

"Indeed," said Alan through the door. "A British breakfast for two. We have a train to catch rather soon." Earlier this week, he'd had his housekeeper send his bag ahead to Cumbria in the Lake District.

"Very good, sir. Full breakfast for two."

"Wash," said Zeno, sticking his head out of the bathroom. At the sound of the maid, he'd darted right in there and started the tub. He looked happy. "Hot water."

Alan joined Zeno in the bath for a minute, and the dear boy brought him right off. But then Alan grew anxious about the return of the maid. He donned his clothes and rucked up the second bed so it would look slept in. Now Zeno emerged from his bath, utterly lovely in his nudity. Anxious Alan shooed him into his clothes. Finally the maid appeared with the platters of food, really quite a nice-looking breakfast, with kippers, sausages, fried eggs, toast, honey, marmalade, cream and a lovely great pot of tea, steaming hot.

Seeing the maid face to face, Alan realized they knew each other; she was the cousin of his housekeeper. Although the bent little woman feigned not to recognize him, he could see in her eyes that she knew exactly what he and Zeno were doing here. And there was a sense that she knew something more. She gave him a particularly odd look when she poured out the two mugs of tea. Wanting to be shot of her, Alan handed her a coin and she withdrew.

"Milk tea," said Zeno, tipping half his mug back into the pot and topping it up with cream. He raised the mug as if in a toast, then slurped most of it down. Alan's tea was still too hot for his lips, so he simply waved his mug and smiled.

It seemed that even with the cream, Zeno's tea was very hot indeed. Setting his mug down with a clatter, he began fanning his hands at his mouth, theatrically gasping for breath. Alan took it for a joke, and let out one of his grating laughs. But this was no farce.

Zeno squeaked and clutched at his throat; beads of sweat covered his face; foam coated his lips. He dropped to the floor in a heap, spasmed his limbs like a starfish, and beat a tattoo on the floor.

Hardly knowing what to think, Alan knelt over his inert friend,



massaging his chest. The man had stopped breathing; he had no pulse. Alan made as if to press his mouth to Zeno's, hoping to resuscitate him. But then he smelled bitter almonds – the classic sign of cyanide poisoning.

Recoiling as abruptly as a piece of spring-loaded machinery, Alan ran into the bathroom and rinsed out his mouth. Her Majesty's spymasters had gone mad; they'd meant to murder them both. In the Queen's eyes, Alan was an even greater risk than a rogue atomic scientist. Alan's cryptographic work on breaking the Enigma code was a secret – the very existence of his work was unknown to the public at large.

His only hope was to slip out of the country and take on a new life. But how? He thought distractedly of the ear-shaped form he'd grown in the Petri dish at home. Why not a new face?

Alan leaned over Zeno, rubbing his poor, dear chest. The man was very dead. Alan went and listened by the room's door. Were MI5 agents lurking without, showing their teeth like hideous omnivorous ghouls? But he heard not a sound. The likeliest possibility was that some low-ranking operative had paid the maid to let him dose the tea – and had then gotten well out of the way. Perhaps Alan had a little time.

He imagined setting his internal computational system to double speed. Stepping lively, he exchanged clothes with Zeno – a bit tricky as the other man's body was so limp. Better than rigor mortis, at any rate.

Finding a pair of scissors in Zeno's travel kit, Alan trimmed off the pathetic, noble beard, sticking the whiskers to his own chin with smears of honey. A crude initial imitation, a first-order effect.

Alan packed Zeno's bag and made an effort to lift the corpse to his feet. Good lord but this was hard. Alan thought to tie a necktie to the suitcase, run the tie over his shoulder and knot it around Zeno's right arm. If Alan held the suitcase in his left hand, it made a useful counterweight.

It was a good thing that, having survived the estrogen treatments, Alan had begun training again. He was very nearly as fit as in his early thirties. Suitcase in place, right arm tightly wrapped around Zeno's midriff and grasping the man's belt, Alan waltzed his friend down the hotel's back stairs, emerging into a car park where, thank you Great Algorithmist, a cabbie was having a smoke.

"My friend Turing is sick," said Alan, mustering an imitation of a Greek accent. "I want take him home."

"Blind pissed of a Monday morn'" cackled the cabbie, jumping to his own conclusions. "That's the high life for fair. And red spats! What's our toff's address?"

With a supreme effort, Alan swung Zeno into the cab's rear seat and sat next to him. Alan reached into the body's coat and pretended to read off his home address. Nobody seemed to be tailing the cab. The spooks were lying low, lest blame for the murder fall upon them.

As soon as the cab drew up to Alan's house, he overpaid the driver and dragged Zeno to his feet, waving off all offers of assistance. He didn't want the cabbie to get a close look at the crude honey-sticky beard on his chin. And then he was in his house, which was blessedly empty, Monday being the housekeeper's day off. Moving from window to window, Alan drew the curtains.

He dressed Zeno in Turing pajamas, laid him out in the professorial bed, and vigorously washed the corpse's face, not forgetting to wash his own hands afterwards. Seeking out an apple from the kitchen, he took two bites, then dipped the rest of the apple into a solution of potassium cyanide that he happened to have about the place in a jam jar. He'd always loved the scene in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* when the Wicked Witch lowers an apple into a

cauldron of poison. Dip the apple in the brew, let the sleeping death seep through!

Alan set the poison apple down beside Zeno. A Snow White suicide. Now to perfect the imitation game.

He labored all afternoon. He found a pair of cookie sheets in the kitchen – the housekeeper often did baking for him. He poured a quarter-inch of his specially treated gelatin solution onto each sheet – as it happened, the gelatin was from the bones of a pig. Man's best friend. He set the oven on its lowest heat, and slid in the cookie sheets, leaving the oven door wide open so he could watch. Slowly the medium jelled. Alan's customized jelly contained a sagacious mixture of activator and inhibitor compounds; it was tailored to promote just the right kind of embryological reaction-diffusion computation.

Carefully wielding a scalpel, Alan cut a tiny fleck of skin from the tip of Zeno's cold nose. He set the fleck into the middle of the upper cookie sheet, and then looked in the mirror, preparing to repeat the process on himself. Oh blast, he still had honey and hair on his chin. Silly ass. Carefully he swabbed off the mess with toilet paper, flushing the evidence down the commode. And then he took the scalpel to his own nose.

After he set his fleck of tissue into place on the lower pan, his tiny cut *would* keep on bleeding, and he had to spend nearly half an hour staunching the flow, greatly worried that he might scatter drops of blood around. Mentally he was running double-strength error-checking routines to keep himself from mucking things up. It was so very hard to be tidy.

When his housekeeper arrived tomorrow morning, Alan's digs should look chaste, sarcophagal, Egyptian. The imitation Turing corpse would be a mournful *memento mori* of a solitary life gone wrong, and the puzzled poisoners would hesitate to intervene. The man who knew too much would be dead; that was primary desideratum. After a perfunctory inquest, the Turing replica would be cremated, bringing the persecution to a halt. And Alan's mother might forever believe that her son's death was an accident. For years she'd been chiding him over his messy fecklessness with the chemicals in his home lab.

Outside a car drove past very slowly. The brutes were wondering what was going on. Yet they hesitated to burst in, lest the neighbors learn of their perfidy. With shaking hands, Alan poured himself a glass of sherry. Steady, old man. See this through.

He pulled up a kitchen chair and sat down to stare through the open oven door. Like puffing pastry, the flecks of skin were rising up from the cookie sheets, with disks of cellular growth radiating out as the tissues grew. Slowly the noses hove into view, and then the lips, the eye holes, the forehead, the chins. As the afternoon light waned, Alan saw the faces age, Zeno in the top pan, Alan on the bottom. They began as innocent babes, became pert boys, spotty youths, and finally grown men.

Ah, the pathos of biology's irreversible computations, thought Alan, forcing a wry smile. But the orotund verbiage of academe did little to block the pain. Dear Zeno was dead. Alan's life as he'd known it was at an end. He wept.

It was dark outside now. Alan drew the pans from the oven, shuddering at the enormity of what he'd wrought. The uncanny empty-eyed faces had an expectant air; they were like holiday pie crusts, waiting for steak and kidney, for mincemeat and plums.

Bristles had pushed out of the two flaccid chins, forming little beards. Time to slow down the computation. One didn't want the wrinkles of extreme old age. Alan doused the living faces with inhibitor solution, damping their cellular computations to a normal rate.



He carried the bearded Turing face into his bedroom and pressed it onto the corpse. The tissues took hold, sinking in a bit, which was good. Using his fingers, Alan smoothed the joins at the edges of the eyes and lips. As the living face absorbed cyanide from the dead man's tissues, its color began to fade. A few minutes later, the face was waxen and dead. The illusion was nearly complete.

Alan momentarily lost his composure and gagged; he ran to the toilet and vomited, though little came up. He'd neglected to eat anything today other than those two bites of apple. Finally his stomach-spasms stopped. In full error-correction mode, he remembered to wash his hands several times before wiping his face. And then he drank a quart of water from the tap.

He took his razor and shaved the still-bearded dead Turing face in his bed. The barbering went faster than when he'd shaved Zeno in the hotel. It was better to stand so that he saw the face upside down. Was barbering a good career? Surely he'd never work as a scientist again. Given any fresh input, the halted Turing persecution would resume.

Alan cleaned up once more and drifted back into the kitchen. Time to skulk out through the dark garden with Zeno's passport, bicycle through the familiar woods to a station down the line, and catch a train. Probably the secret police wouldn't be much interested in pursuing Zeno. They'd be glad Zeno had posed their murder as a

suicide, and the less questions asked the better.

But to be safe, Turing would flee along an unexpected route. He'd take the train to Plymouth, the ferry from there to Santander on the north coast of Spain, a train south through Spain to the Mediterranean port of Tarifa, and another ferry from Tarifa to Tangiers.

Tangiers was an open city, an international zone. He could buy a fresh passport there. He'd be free to live as he liked – in a small way. Perhaps he'd master the violin. And read the Iliad in Greek. Alan glanced down at the flaccid Zeno face, imagining himself as a Greek musician.

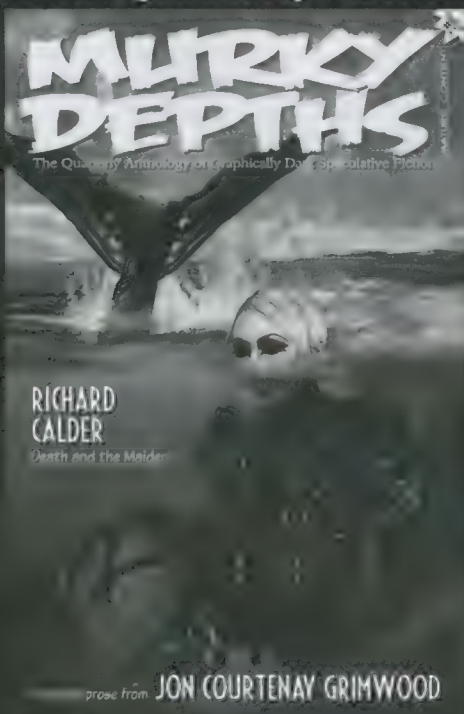
If you were me, from A to Z, if I were you, from Z to A...

Alan caught himself. His mind was spinning in loops, avoiding what had to be done next. It was time.

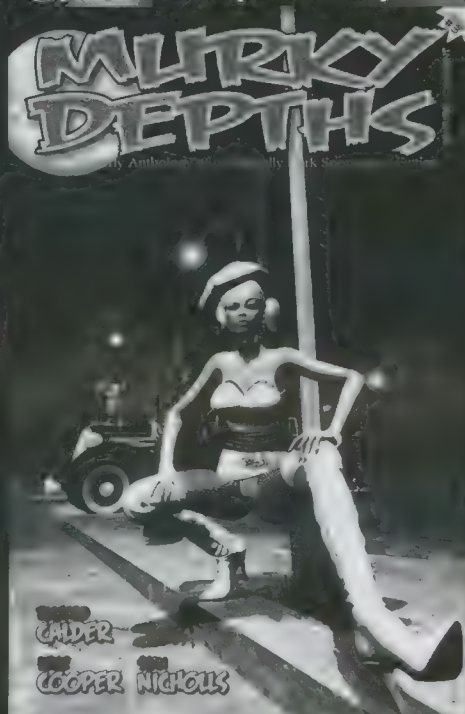
He scrubbed his features raw and donned his new face. ✧

Rudy Rucker has worked as a mathematics professor, a software engineer, a computer science professor, an artist and a writer. He's published twenty-nine books, including a non-fiction book on the meaning of computers: *The Lifebox, the Seashell and the Soul*. He has been known to say everything is made of gnarl. He publishes an online SF zine called *Flurb*. He's currently writing a cyberpunkish trilogy of novels in which nanotechnology changes everything. He's currently finishing the second of the series, *Hylozoic*. The first in the series, *Postsingular*, appeared from Tor in Fall, 2007, and is also available for free download on the web. See Rudy's portal, [rudyrucker.com](http://rudyrucker.com), for more info.

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COVER ART BY DAVID GENTRY

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*Mystery Scene*


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into the souls of his characters'

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personal inability to affect circumstance'

*Infinity Plus*





we all have our dark side

# ALISON

ANDREW HUMPHREY



## PAUL RAVEN

2007 was an exciting year for me, not least through becoming Book Reviews Editor here at *Interzone*. The downside of that has been that I've not had the amount of spare time I used to reserve for reading – so while I've been working more closely with books, I haven't read anywhere near as many as usual!

The upside is that I've had access to some great novels without having to wait for my personal budget or the local library to accommodate them.

A number of titles have taken close looks at the nastier side of humanity – whether as individuals or organisations, or simply as a collection of behaviours. Richard Morgan's **Black Man** (ironically renamed **Thirteen** for the US market) tipped over the rock of prejudice and exposed some writhing and wriggling nastiness to the sunlight, and in the process delivered that rarest of things: an intelligent yet brutal action thriller.

Ken MacLeod's **The Execution Channel** does something similar with terrorism and the politics of fear, masquerading as a subtle alternate history with an SF-nal core.

Meanwhile Adam Roberts delivered a subtle satire of religious fundamentalism in all its flavours in **Land of the Headless**, a book whose sly humour and unreliable narrator I enjoyed as much as other reviewers appear to have loathed them.

2007 also provided plenty of what, for lack of a better or less clichéd word, one might describe as 'romps'. Rudy Rucker's **Post-singular** is definitely a romp, a breezy and playful psychedelic adventure through California and the multiverse, replete with talking cephalopods, nanotechnology swarms, geek speak and hipster slang... and a generous side serving of human interest.

Karl Schroeder's second instalment in his Virga series is set against one of the lushly realised fictional worlds that are rapidly becoming his trademark. **Queen of Candesce** has a backdrop that's simultaneously steampunk and space opera, a complex and believably flawed lead character, and plenty of action and intrigue.

Marianne de Pierres stepped boldly into the space opera arena with a strong opening gambit in the form of **Dark Space**, a richly and complicated novel that deploys feminist issues and complex characters to compelling effect, and that bodes well for a strong series to follow it.

And already I'm running short of space, without having mentioned Charles Stross' **Halting State** or Ian MacDonald's **Brasyl** or any short fiction at all... nor Douglas Rushkoff's **Testament** and Brian K. Vaughan's **Y: The Last Man**, two superb (and very genuinely sf-nal) serial comics drawing near their closing points. So much to praise, so little time!

But I can pick my personal favourite with ease. One volume I knew that wouldn't pass through my hands for review nor be acquired by the library was Subterranean Press's beautiful **Ascendancies: the Best of Bruce Sterling**. So as a card-carrying Sterling fanboy, I pre-ordered my copy long ago – and I savoured every story in a collection that will remain on my favourites list for many years to come.

What is still more interesting is watching my colleagues on the *Interzone* reviews team trace their own favoured threads through the year, and noting how often the same books and themes crop up, albeit in different contexts.

For instance, Ian MacDonald's *Brasyl* makes repeated appearances

– not just here but in many other 2007 retrospectives, both in print and on the web – but not with universal acclaim. It's interesting to see how polar the opinions on a single work can be. I take that as a sign of rude health in both the world of sf publishing and the critical apparatus of active fandom as well.

It should also be obvious that 2007 was a year not just bountiful in alternate history novels but unusually blessed with examples of the form that were – as well as being greatly acclaimed by critics and readers alike – frequently not marketed as science fiction at all. Whether this is a statistical blip on the radar of publishing or a sign of a growing trend remains to be seen.

Enough of my rambling. Let's hear from the team!

## ANDY HEDGECOCK

In 2007 I read **The Middle Mind**, Curtis White's dazzling but depressing indictment of the degradation of culture under late capitalism: a searing assault on art that is unimaginative, uncritical and utterly relentless in its pursuit of a fast buck. The books I've chosen are tools for the destabilisation of the Middle Mind. Inventive, provocative and idiosyncratic, they illuminate a landscape of grey and glutinous cultural flotsam with flashes of imagination.

John Crowley's **Endless Things** completes a harrowing, exhilarating and mind-opening journey that began when I bought a copy of *Aegypt*, the first book in the 'Aegypt Cycle', twenty years ago. Since then, Crowley has taken his readers through the Rosicrucian Enlightenment of Dr Dee and Giordano Bruno, the consciousness revolution of the 1960s and *two* ends of the world. Our symbolic journey continues in the company of Pierce Moffet, a freelance scholar and magus manqué, who rejects philosophical orthodoxy and highlights the limitless human capacity for metamorphosis and spiritual growth. *Endless Things* is illusive, allusive and erudite: it demands high levels of concentration, but repays that with the unalloyed pleasure of its wit and revelatory storytelling.

Another story cycle with an eschatological thread is Mike Carey's increasingly dark Felix Castor series. **Dead Men's Boots**, the third Castor book, takes the eponymous supernatural gumshoe from familiar territory in North London to the stamping ground of a dead American serial killer in Alabama. Castor investigates the suicide of a fellow exorcist, whose malevolent spirit haunts his widow, and uncovers a chilling supernatural conspiracy. Castor's world is one in which the dead are increasingly reluctant to stay dead, and encounters with demons, zombies and werebeasts are increasingly common. Carey's meticulously developed sense of place, fine ear for dialogue and rich characterisation make it totally convincing. Castor has the damaged charm of Chandler's Marlowe and the supporting cast – not least the vegetarian lesbian succubus and paranoid zombie hacker who support Castor's investigations – contribute to the reader's acceptance of escalating levels of supernatural mayhem. Mike Carey is an assured and entertaining storyteller who transcends the supernatural thriller with his erudition and symbolically chilling insights into the way we live now.

Finally, the standout story collection of 2007 was Christopher Fowler's **Old Devil Moon** – a welcome return to short dark fiction by one of its masters. There are 22 stories – hilarious, experimental and disturbing by turns – that demonstrate Fowler has lost none of his knack to unsettle and beguile. Who could fail to be beguiled by a story that alludes to a lecture on Hungarian Erotic Bathchairs,





delivered in Welsh? The stories themselves and the author's introduction are heartening reminders that the battle against the culture of the Middle Mind is far from over.

#### TONY LEE

With its revised timeline and 'uncertainty is information' paranoia, Ken MacLeod's **Execution Channel** is a fine novel of British dystopia, all the better for its subdued authorial polemic. The cathartic satire of **Land of the Headless** by Adam Roberts appealed to, or annoyed, my militant atheist views. It's certainly one of the darkest SF realms yet imagined. Paul McAuley's **Cowboy Angels** serves up plenty of notions borrowed from sci-fi TV, along with some gripping action scenes, but proved a major disappointment from such a well-respected genre author. Michael Marshall Smith's haunted house novel **The Servants** was rather ordinary, despite some atmospheric writing about Brighton as the off-season locale. Then, along came Ian McDonald's **Brasyl** to spoil a pleasant reading period. I enjoyed bits of the present-day stuff, but found the historical and futuristic chapters extremely irritating or vaguely boring, so I soon abandoned – without regret – this widely overrated book.

William Gibson's **Spook Country** is packed with purposeless incidents, and lacks a plot or proper SF content. The novel's overly stylised prose so frequently borders on impressively 'exotic' nonsense there's wry amusement on nearly every page. Here's a "Darth my ride" limousine door that opens "like some disturbing hybrid of bank vault and Armani evening purse, perfectly balanced bomb-proof solidity meeting sheer cosmetic slickness." There's a dose of designer drug 'Rize', which chills out "like a molecule-thick silver membrane of Chinese antimatter." Several weird yet amiable characters operate in a murky grey area of international commerce and techno art where commonsense, never mind legality, finds no place or purchase. It seems like a fashionable location, location, location...but, honestly, who'd dream of living there? Isn't that the ultimate test of any 'ideal' fictional setting?

Ever since Colin Wilson and John Grant's *Directory of Possibilities*, such guidebooks to the fantastic have fascinated me. **Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained** is a comprehensive, illustrated A-Z reference about strange phenomena, supernatural entities, cults, hoaxes, and extraordinary things from our apparent reality, presented here with clarity, intelligence, and good humour. My recent non-fiction reading also included Paul Sammon's updated **Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner**, which remains an intriguing film study, second time around (especially if considered

alongside Ridley Scott's *Final Cut*).

**Postsingular** by Rudy Rucker delivers a torrent of darkest whimsy and speculative physics. A nanotech plague quietly demolishes planet Earth, but a saviour scientist's psychic virus quickly reverses the effects, so everything and everyone just turned into VR simulacra are made corporeal again. And that's merely the initial chapter! Hidden in the expected avalanche of cutting-edge utopian ideas, and off-kilter yet enjoyably spirited web-soap episodes, we find neo-colloquial gems ("It was awesome to kiq it with the Prav"), coined by the twisty sensibilities of Rucker's viewpoint characters. Repeatedly, I was reminded of the welcome originality in early Jeff Noon (from *Vurt*, *Pollen*, *Nymphomation*, to *Pixel Juice*), that's how truly great the startling affect of this SF 'book of the year' is!

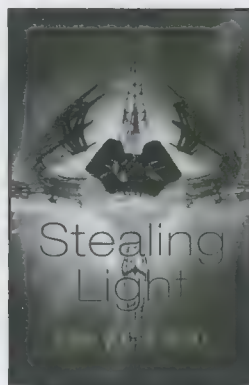
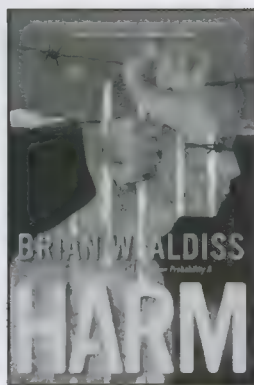
#### IAIN EMSLEY

Last year harboured a few outstanding books, some of which – like Ian MacDonald's **Brasyl** – have raised an army of fans. *Brasyl* extends MacDonald's exploration of SF from the edges, from cultures which we often ignore.

China Miéville's **Un Lun Dun** was, to me, a great return to storytelling form and is a homage to Lewis Carroll and E. Nesbit. Set in an alternative London, Miéville plays with the 'looking-glass world' trope but manages to reign in the politics so that they don't swamp the story. Zanna and Deeba are fantastic characters who exist in the madcap-type world we first saw in New Crobuzon, and they introduce us to a world made of books. Drawn into a looking-glass world, they find themselves needing to discover what their roles are, let alone how the world operates and what the challenge is. Like the fantasy world of Bas Lag, *Un Lun Dun* riffs off Miéville's reading but it never gets in the way, and in some ways it opens up a game for the reader. It's reminiscent of Christopher Fowler's *Roofworld* or Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*.

Gordon Dahlquist's **The Glassbooks of the Dream Eaters** was one of *those* books – it took me a while to read, but it was gratifying to do so. Sonorous and grandiose, it harks back to 19th Century detective novels and tells a slightly stilted story of a daring plan to take over the world. Originally delivered in ten parts, its episodic nature shows through, but it's a great experiment nonetheless. Dahlquist's characters draw the reader in through their initial lack of definition and then invite the reader to follow them as they discover the narrative – and the world – for themselves. What begins as a slow burn turns into a barnstorming ending, as all the plots come together in the crashing finale.





Elizabeth Hand's **Generation Loss** is a strange book, mimetic yet truly fantastic. A romp from the late 1970s through until the 1990s, it follows the fortunes of a photographer who has lost her fame but is asked to do a one-off shoot with a recluse. As she comes to Maine, the true meaning of the assignment comes into view. The book left me with the lasting image of a black and white photograph stained by bourbon.

Finally, the **Interfictions** collection by Theodora Goss and Delia Sherman is a really worthwhile collection that will alter the way that you look at genre fiction – not to mention introduce you to some fabulous new writers.

#### PAUL KINCAID

The book of the year for me, without a shadow of a doubt, has to be **Endless Things** by John Crowley, if only because we've been waiting twenty years for it, and after all that time it doesn't disappoint. After *Daemonomania* I thought he had already brought the sequence to a close and couldn't imagine what he might do with the fourth volume. The surprising, and surprisingly effective, thing he does is open the whole sequence up again, as if *Endless Things* gives it a fresh start; it is freer, lighter, faster moving than any of the previous volumes, and turns nearly every one of our expectations on their heads.

For me, 2007 was an excellent year and there were half a dozen or more titles that would have topped this list another time, but two other books ran Crowley particularly close. Neither was published or promoted as science fiction, but both use the tropes of alternate history to startling effect. **The Yiddish Policemen's Union** by Michael Chabon was, as we have come to expect, beautifully written, extraordinarily funny and astoundingly powerful. A brilliantly judged combination of noir thriller and alternate history, it saves its greatest shock for the end when his segregated and disaffected Jews carry out an attack that is every bit as huge and world-changing in this timeline as 9/11 was in ours.

Every bit as good was **Resistance**, a first novel by the poet Owen Sheers. The situation is familiar: Germany is victorious in World War II; but what he does with it is moving and original. All the men in a remote Welsh valley disappear in the very first sentence of the novel; we presume they have joined the resistance but we never see them again. Instead we follow the women as they struggle to cope with the harsh implacability of the landscape and the reality of German soldiers who themselves are trying to escape the war. It is a book that has, I think, gone unnoticed by most of the sf community, which is the saddest thing about the year.

But this choice leaves no room to discuss Ken MacLeod's **The Execution Channel**, or Christopher Barzak's **One For Sorrow**, or **Cowboy Angels** by Paul McAuley, or **HARM** which is the best

novel for years from Brian Aldiss, or...let's just say it was a rare year when we were spoiled with riches.

#### RICK KIEFFEL

Three novels from last year stood as exemplars of both historical fiction and speculative fiction. The surreal literary horror of Erika Mailman's **The Witch's Trinity**, the serene polar vistas of Dan Simmons' **The Terror**, and the graceful, joyous family saga of Kathleen Ann Goonan's **In War Times** all demonstrated the depth and power of historical fiction unlatched from the limits of mimetic realism.

Dan Simmons' *The Terror* is based on the true story of HMS Terror which, along with HMS Erebus, disappeared while trying to discover the Northwest in 1845. Ambitiously architected, this long and complex novel immerses the reader in a world that is both hyperreal in detail and yet surreal in effect. Simmons takes readers on the journey of HMS Terror, following Captain Crozier and his crew to a fate both foreseen and unexpected. It's rich with realistically rendered characters, superb set-pieces and a hint of the supernatural that is truly awesome. By focusing on the historical details, Simmons escapes the bounds of history and engages the imagination.

You'll have to sidle over to the Fiction aisles to find *The Witch's Trinity* by Erika Mailman, which is being marketed as mainstream literature. The writing is indeed quite fine, but Mailman's novel, told from the perspective of an aging woman in a 16th Century German village slowly succumbing to starvation is a powerful and gripping fairy tale, realistically rendered, with implications for the twenty-first century that cannot be ignored. Güde Muller has lived beyond her years, and her daughter-in-law Irmeltrude is resentful. When the well-fed travelling representative of the Catholic Church arrives, armed with the 'knowledge' from the latest in witchfinding technology, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book that gives detailed instructions on how to identify the enemy within, hope springs forth. Mailman's visions of witch's Sabbaths and ritual fires are searing and intense acts of imaginative fiction, based on but freed from reality.

Kathleen Ann Goonan also deals in history, but *In War Times* balances tragedy and reality with a powerfully poignant vision of what could be. Sam Dance is an enlisted soldier smart and lucky enough to have been shuffled into an academic fast-track, where he meets physicist Eliana Hadntz, who gives him the plan for a device and a working model. With it, Sam can step through varying time-lines and live in alternate pasts, presents and futures. Including actual passages from the journals of Goonan's father, *In War Times* is a full-blown, multi-generational family saga that uses the tools of science fiction to evoke not just wonder but emotions. Concise, gripping and inventive, *In War Times* is a vision of hope, wonder



and tragedy.

All three novels mentioned here share one trait: they are set in the recognisable, documented historical past, yet explore the terrain with the tools and techniques of speculative fiction. Novels of science fiction are not limited to futuristic settings; the past can be as effectively explored with the imagination as the future.

#### PAUL F. COCKBURN

At the risk of being confused with some inadequate literary groupie, hanging onto the coat-tails of successfully published authors, I can say that 2007 was a good year for new books written by my friends, acquaintances and other people that I nod to in passing at conventions.

Some of the books were new twists from assured hands: Ken MacLeod as the futuristic thriller writer brave enough, with **The Execution Channel**, to actually follow through on the consequences of his ideas; Richard Morgan pushing his own personal envelope with **Black Man**; and Charles Stross exploring new realms with wit and complex originality. Others were the work of so-called newcomers: Alan Campbell, whose **Scar Night** held my attention throughout the kind of fantasy I'd normally avoid; Gavin Inglis, a master of amusing and chilling prose, with his delightful **Crap Ghosts**; and, at last, a long overdue edition of Andrew J. Wilson's poignant, heartfelt tribute to Rod Serling, **The Terminal Zone**.

Two books in particular, though, acted as bookends of my personal reading during 2007: Hal Duncan's **Ink** and Gary Gibson's **Stealing Light**.

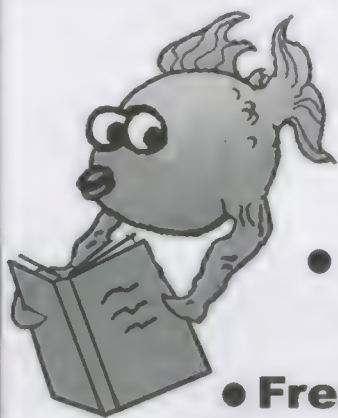
*Ink*, of course, is the massive continuation and conclusion of Duncan's equally considerable *Vellum*. As the second half of *The*

*Book of All Hours*, it was no surprise that *Ink* featured an abundance of mythical and pop-cultural allusions amid a clashing of parallel and palimpsestic histories. As with *Vellum*, I willingly submerged myself into the language and action of the book, trusting the author to take me on a meaningful journey through the following 600-plus pages. Nor was I disappointed by its simple message: people die.

Though *Ink* seems more linear in its overall narrative than its predecessor – necessarily collecting together narrative strands laid down in *Vellum* – the overall *Book of All Hours* is far more structured than it might at first seem – its narrative hanging on a framework built up from chapter to section to book. Equally carefully structured, though operating only in one timeline, is Gibson's *Stealing Light* – his third novel and the first of a new trilogy. Here, carefully placed flashbacks reveal more than just basic plot information; they help shape how the reader views the main characters and the events they are experiencing.

Gibson's skill is the economic creation of convincing characters and plausible futures; his particular talent, though, is defining character and imparting information through dialogue. And, it must be said, racking up the tension around what is one of the largest loaded pistols in recent SF.

Gibson's prose may not be as flamboyant as Duncan's, but what they both share is an innate scepticism about clear-cut heroes and villains. Gibson successfully ensures that his main protagonist is as much a danger to other people as they are to her. The *Book of All Hours*, meantime, underlines precisely why Duncan believes it is "the heroes – men who would be gods – who tear this world apart with those blind, brutal certainties, and it's the rest of us who're left to stumble through the ruins, gathering our dead." ✨



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## MUTANT POPCORN › NICK LOWE



**Cloverfield** is a date movie, like 9/11 and its too many siblings to count, here documenting the story of the "Saturday May 23rd" (so apparently 2009) in which Cthulhu comes calling in downtown Manhattan, with all his little Cthulhettes to scamper around the bits he can't fit into and spread the gift of jeopardy through any dark passages the camera's wielders may choose to wander down. Obviously, not everyone will feel that we should be celebrating 11 September 2001 as The Day That Monster Movies Changed Forever. But *Cloverfield* has given itself the noble mission of redeeming Hollywood from the conundrum of how it can ever again make audiences feel threatened by beasts from 20,000 fathoms. Now that moviemakers have helpful reference footage of what trashing Manhattan actually looks like, never again will it be possible to show Gajira knocking down skyscrapers without an iconic dust cloud filling the streets; and never again will it be possible to detonate an apocalyptic scenario downtown without meretricious and frankly tasteless recollection of America's favourite nightmare. How can anything survive such changes in the world we knew?

*Cloverfield's* solution, and its undeniably big idea, is nothing less than to write the first textbook for the narrative grammar of Film 2.0, drawing on the disparate threads of "reality" entertainment, amateur video, surveillance footage, user-generated web-clip entertainment, embedded documentary, and 24-style pseudo-realtime to assemble a new syntax of cinema in which the narrative camera is placed in the world and hands of the characters. But where its closest film ancestor *The Blair Witch Project* was genuinely cheap, amateurish, improvised, and left-field, *Cloverfield* is an extremely professional and expensive mainstream blockbuster in carefully-tailored tatty street clothes. Even aside from the cg effects, the dialogue is a lot more scripted than it affects, the handheld camera more storyboarded, the sound mix intricately assembled, and the setups constructed and blocked as rigorously as in any other non-sense action spectacular.

Beneath the unpolished veneer, in fact, is a radically conventional film, entirely compliant with the protocols of act structure and the conventions of the classical monster genre, for all its show of stomping round smushing the monoliths of traditional Hollywood storytelling. There's the obligatory deadline-scheduled airlift from the centre of ground zero; the cast segregated into three circles of designated survivors, supporting players available for shock dispatch, and casual expendables; the climactic money shot of the monster (here a rather disappointing Fin Fang Foom without the underpants); and defiantly old-school lines like "Whatever it is, it's winning!", "Maybe our government made this thing!", and "Initiating hammerdown!" A mainstream film score and merchandisable soundtrack album have been more of a challenge, but the former is taken care of by admitting big-orchestrated end credits, and the latter ingeniously boosted by devoting the whole first act to an extended party scene. In fact, it's impossible not to admire the technical ingenuity and verve with which *Cloverfield's* script and direction find workarounds for all the familiar things that shooting in YouTubeque *réalité* should make it impossible to finesse, and tricks to play with the new narrative toys. In particular, the "footage found" device lifted from *Blair Witch* enables a form of first-person narration in which the actual characters don't have to survive; and though throughout you expect and dread a closing shot from the abandoned camera of the rescue copter lifting off from Central

Park, what you get is a much cleverer, neater, and more satisfying use of the conceit. It's still not as scary or as haunting as *Blair Witch*, or even as Small Porgies out of *Just So Stories*; but then not much is, even in what passes for reality.



It's particularly instructive, if not exactly pleasurable, to watch *Cloverfield* back-to-back with **Aliens vs Predator: Requiem**, which is essentially the same film but made in the style of an ultra-traditional old-school monster B-movie. When a Predator ship infected by Aliens crashes in backwoods Colorado and a lone Predator pursuer rides into town to clean up the trash, it's the cue for a collection of variously expendable twentysomethings plus Reiko Aylesworth in a vest to try to make their way to the escape copter on the roof of the Alien nest before the military sterilise the town with a friendly nuke. This *House of Frankenstein* of two once-mighty franchises is a sad elegy for the *Alien* series in particular, which even in the first *AvP* was sufficiently confident of its mythic muscle to feel no need to open up its traditional claustrophobic settings, let alone to stoop to the banalities of smalltown invasion and stalking a blonde played by someone called Kristen who proposes a midnight swim solely so that she can spend her remaining screentime in a swimsuit. It's also debatable whether the old *Alien* would stoop to facehugging kids in the prologue or infecting an entire neonatal ward of helpless crying infants. The strength of the first *AvP* film, which I thought like many Paul W.S. Anderson films rather underappreciated, was its maker's trademark grasp of the cutting edge of narrative poetics where film meets games and comics. But *Requiem* has no such sense of cross-medium form, and slips back instead into by-numbers smalltown survival-horror; while its meaningless title, apparently chosen solely because it sounds good on a spinoff game, is a particularly unfortunately tag for this (please God) last resting-place of Hollywood's once-favourite sesquiquadrilogy.

An entirely different breed of monster movie is **The Water-Horse: Legend of the Deep**, latest of Walden Media's earnest adaptations of quality schoolroom classics. These are increasingly diverging into two species: those like *Narnia* and *Bridge to Terabithia* where the source text is a heavily assigned US primary-school favourite whose lineaments must be faithfully preserved, and those like *The Dark is Rising* where the fanbase is an ocean away and the source can be cheerfully torn up and rewritten. Dick King-Smith's 1990 novella



is very much in the second category: a characteristically gentle, affirmative period tale of family and wildlife bonding together in mutual affection and support, with two children finding and hatching a kelpie that becomes a family pet until it grows too big and has to be regretfully released into the wild in a deepwater loch whose name it will then make famous. Though King-Smith's vast output has an extraordinary virtual monopoly on its underserved age-group in the UK, penetration into the US market remains limited for all but a handful of titles, and so the Walden team has thought nothing of turning the plot into *Free Nessie*, and the family, as in *Dark is Rising*, from a warm and close-knit unit (which was the point) to a fractured, dysfunctional, and headless household riven with father-son issues. It scarcely needs saying that the sister, joint lead in the book, is thanklessly demoted; while the setting has been moved up a decade into 1942, with the war bringing violence, bereavement, and crudely-wrought class issues into the centre of the story in ways utterly at odds with the spirit of the book.

It has to be admitted that, on its own terms, the film achieves what it intends quite well. I watched with two females aged 9–10, and they were going *aww* and *cute!* all the way through, notwithstanding some needlessly scary episodes when the soldiers were trying to catch and kill the monster as soldiers do. Many of the cast are excellent, with wee Alex Etel from *Millions* entirely superb in the lead; and the landscapes are a particularly striking marketing tool for [visitscotland.com](http://visitscotland.com) (an advert for whom immediately precedes the film), being mostly filmed not in Scotland at all but in Queenstown, NZ. Like *Loch Ness*, it pitches itself at the North American visitor – here quite literally, with a grown-up Brian Cox telling his story to a pair of tourists in a pub called the Bonnie Piper – and pimps its heritage management outrageously: the characters inhabit a vast Rennie Mackintosh-panelled mansion, but (it transpires) are only the caretakers for an absentee landlord who has let it out to billet a literal army of foreign visitors. I daresay that's how we look to them.



Walden's other seasonal offering has found a rather different remedy for the discomforts of adaptation. Rather than burn money on expensive Roald Dahl rights when you're only going to knock it all to bits anyway, why not fob the audience off with an affordable facsimile? This seems to be why we have **Mr Magorium's Wonder Emporium**, the directorial bow of *Stranger Than Fiction* writer Zach Helm, based on his mouldering graduation script about a managerial succession crisis in a magic NY toystore. As a simulation of Dahl, it's only so-so: many of the instore scatter-gags are quite in keeping, but the real Dahl would never have let a name like "Magorium" through the door, and from quite early on it succumbs to a sentimentality and self-help homilising entirely alien to the master, while at the same time resisting the darker edginess that true Dahl likes to layer in. It's unfair to grade it merely as pastiche, of course, but the tonal comparison is nevertheless quite revealing of what doesn't work and why. Like the later-written *Stranger Than Fiction*, which visibly drew on it for ideas, it's very much a writer's film, with once again a

blocked creative trying to find outlet and self-validation, and once again a likable antagonist in the form of an accountant who can do Fibonacci in his head but has to be retrained to appreciate the value of fun. But the writing is actually rather weak, with an awful start (it picks up once we finally get into the shop) and a particularly poor climax: "It's *you*... What you need to believe in is *you*." [V.O.:] "And that's how Molly Mahoney's story began. The End." The resistance to pat romance, gratuitous villainy and threat, and indeed any discernible plot are, I suppose, to be cautiously applauded, and I did catch my ten-year-old surreptitiously wiping an eye when Dustin Hoffman delivers his fortune-cookie farewell line to a rather sweet Natalie Portman. But it's a little disconcerting to see branded commercial toys on the racks prominently product-placed alongside the magical merchandise, and all too evident that Helm himself has never actually been inside a real magic toyshop (such as Kristin Baybar's opposite Gospel Oak station, for one). Like his heroes, he probably needs to get out of his head more.



Elsewhere, the festive slate was a busy one this year. Disney weighed in strongly with Disney-Princess-in-NY fable *Enchanted*, not just the girliest Christmas no. 1 in memory but also the gayest; and astonishingly feebly with *Underdog*, live-action retread of a deservedly forgotten sixties cartoon about a pill-popping Krypto knockoff battling a hideous dwarf mad scientist called, incredibly, Simon Barsinister. (No doubt the makers would protest that many of their best friends are hideous dwarf mad scientists.) DreamWorks mustered the pleasingly surreal *Bee Movie*, essentially an introduction to Marxist economics for four-and-ups that also manages to use the magic of animated family comedy to talk about race, class, agribusiness, and the industrialisation of food production; and the strange *Penelope* escaped after a year and a half on the shelf to bewilder audiences with its logic-free whimsithon about a pignosed Christina Ricci seeking romance and fulfilment on the mean streets of a fairytale midatlantic city that looks like London (except the cg bits) but is populated by British actors randomly affecting American accents, or not.

But the most uncertain splash was made by **The Golden Compass**, which largely flopped in the land of its title but performed much better here and internationally. This visually ravishing but uncomfortably scripted adaptation of the book we know as Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* has been made to a fairly impossible brief, in having to prove the trilogy's commercial viability to New Line before the later films would be greenlit, so it's not surprising that Chris Weitz's version has ended up a bit of a bodge. It's pretty startling to see a film of any part of *His Dark Materials* in which the words "church" and "original sin" are never even uttered; you can



bet they'd have been there in the discarded Stoppard script – and the novel's plot has been radically disassembled into its component incidents and the pieces sellotaped back together in a completely different causal sequence, with the actual ending and its extremely unfeelgood revelation about the luckless Roger artfully banished to the start of the next film. As on many other points, you can see why they've done what they've done, and a film version of *The Subtle Knife* could actually be stronger for the addition of a Lyra prologue than if it went straight into the world of Will and his loopy mum. Indeed, there are many excellent things about Weitz's version, including a first-rate Lyra and a wondrously efficient prologue voiceover that manages to condense three volumes' worth of explanation about Dust, daemons, bears, witches, Gypsies, and alethiometers into about three sentences. If there's rather too much reading of the next scene off the alethiometer – surely literature's most shameless ever plot device – at least the steampunk England of the first section is quite beautiful, and Nicole Kidman's cold-eyed performance is everything it should be, such that you hardly mind that none of the supporting cast are terribly good at all. Pullman's central conceit of external souls as pets comes wonderfully into its own as a visual device, although unprimed viewers may be puzzled by all the talk of a procedure called "indecision": rather an apt description of the hesitation over theology, script, and sequel commitment that lies behind the intercision of so much of the novel's own soul. We'll have to wait and see whether the next world offers redemption.

As it turned out, the seasonal blockbuster adaptation was not *Compass* but *I Am Legend*, ironically the most comprehensively unmade film of the preceding decade. This is a project into whose various aborted versions Warners have sunk so much development cash over the years that it's faintly astonishing to see it on screen at all – particularly as screens have been awash with knockoffs since the 2002 double whammy of franchise log-rollers *Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later*, which have further restricted the available room for manoeuvre in this first credited version of Richard Matheson's novel since 1971's *The Omega Man*. Over the course of its long development, the setting has gone from LA to San Francisco back to LA and finally and inevitably to Manhattan; Robert Neville has been Tom Cruise, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Will Smith, and eventually Will Smith again; original writer Mark Protosevich has been fired and rehired repeatedly as one director after another has been attached, then detached; and the novel has been rethought and rewritten from every imaginable angle, till the last script standing looks like something of a survivalist legend in its own right. Plot elements like Neville's dog, his tapes, the characters of Anna and her kid, the mannequin and trap, the captured female come trailing huge bubble-chamber tracks through the production history, while among the relatively early casualties were Matheson's central conceit of his Krippen virus as a rationale for the myth of vampirism (cool then, tepid now); the infected's capacity for articulate reason and speech; and, needless to say, the original ending (and point of the title), which has swung between upbeat and down to fetch finally up at just rubbish.

The film that's emerged from all this is, unsurprisingly, a very mixed success, and strongest in its mood-setting first hour – which essentially follows the austere spectacular lines conceived originally by Ridley Scott during his 1997–8 involvement (before he was sacked by Warners and took his creative team off to make *Gladiator* on the rebound), though with the addition of a canine sidekick to give the star someone to talk to and, more importantly, act off. (This, of course, is the very same storytelling cheat that led Pullman

to the concept of daemons.) It holds out as long as it can against the survival-horror plot virus, but progressively and messily mutates into *Resident Evil: Lost in New York*. Perhaps it's no more than it deserves, since despite a string of consultants with the Dr prefix, Colonel Doctor Will rather betrays the novel's elegant flim-flam scientism by instead taking his foundations of virology from Bob Marley: "He had this idea, kind of a virologist idea: he thought you could cure people of racism and hatred by injecting them with music." Well, yes, but he wasn't much of an advert for conventional medicine, was he?



But the most ambitious doomsday movie of the season was Richard Kelly's unfairly derided *Southland Tales*, the film half of his epic comics/movie hybrid about a sprawling cast of weirdos stumbling through industrial quantities of story in a near-future world of paranoia, conspiracy, and political breakdown towards a final cosmic cliffhanger in spacetime. It is, safe to say, a pretty unique experience. The first three of the saga's six chapters appeared as a graphic novel series, so that the film dumps you straight in the middle of a vast and bonkers apocalyptic soap with two amnesiac leads stuck in a huge politico-industrial conspiracy plot in which they, like we, know neither who they are nor what's going on. Surprisingly, though, you do find yourself swimming with it, and the film's legendarily apocalyptic fate among audiences and critics alike is probably less to do with its narrative weaknesses than with the particular kind of story it chooses to tell. Unlike pretty much everyone else in Hollywood, Kelly is dangerously serious about physics and about sf, and *Southland Tales* is fairly open about its particular debt of tone and texture to the later novels of Philip K. Dick. This works rather well on the graphics page, but becomes a distinctly more specialised taste when transferred to film, where it's become something of an encyclopedia of things you're supposed not to be able to do: huge novelistic casts and story webs; epic running times without a recognised brand to sustain them; rapid, geeky concept barrages in voiceover and exposition; disdain for the shibboleths of character arc and conventional act structure; above all, a plot awfully like a high-aiming, fan-friendly, propeller-headed science fiction novel. It's a fairly doomed enterprise which, like *Donnie Darko*, loads more anticipation on to its ending than the climactic conceit will actually bear, and this time without the support of an obviously cool teen-culture environment. Yet the cast do an impressive job of pretending they know what's going on in their scenes, and there are many great lines and vignettes, with plenty of sharp dramatic beats to keep the whole thing moving along. I personally wouldn't have minded another three hours, but it's probably a relief that it's unlikely to spawn any followers. **Nick Lowe**



## TO METALUNA &amp; BACK AGAIN

Somewhere between the glorious homecoming of *Star Trek: Voyager* in 2001, and the foregone conclusion of *Star Wars*' atrocious prequel trilogy with *Revenge Of The Sith* in 2005, space opera for the screen expired from sheer exhaustion, the inevitable result of incessant starship battles, and the overkill of blatantly 'foreign-devil' villains targeting rebel spacers and ethical heroes with uninspired plots of conquest. Since then, there has been so little originality or even fashionable amusement to be found in this subgenre that assorted filmmakers and franchise contributors abandoned any last pretence of being inventive, opting for a damaging reuptake of popular elements and very basic themes. The tenth *Trek* film, *Nemesis* (2003), was a dismal last outing for the *Next Generation* crew. *Star Trek* prequel *Enterprise* (2001-5) proved a non-starter, failing to maintain the sadly pedestrian standard established by previous *Trek* shows, or meet even the most pessimistic fans' expectations. Rockne S. O'Bannon's *Farscape* (1999-2003) had secret admirers of its genre deconstructions, but it never avoided schlock-of-the-knew associations as a pimped-up variation of *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*, and those ghastly muppet characters were ultimately its downfall. A love of simplistic adventure is never enough, as Joss Whedon soon found out.

*Firefly* (2002), and spin-off movie *Serenity* (2005), added nothing worthwhile to its allegedly science fictional milieu of inter-worldly buccaneering, except mildly witty attempts to subvert the overly familiar conventions of both sci-fi and westerns with pointlessly quirky characters, salty humour, or 'astonishing' narrative twists devised only to blindside irregular viewers. *Children Of Dune* (2003), the follow-up to 2000's underwhelming miniseries (a TV remake of classic *Dune*, 1984), was a shamelessly deadweight misadventure, trashing the messianic appeal of Frank Herbert's enduring legacy, and replacing David Lynch's widescreen baroque of dreamscape horrors with feeble CGI. Steven Soderbergh's aimless 2003 retread of Tarkovsky's extraordinary *Solaris* (1972) cruised by, all tricked out with glossy hardware and a fittingly sombre mood, but its cast lacked conviction, and the film remains a regrettable example of just how wrongheaded Hollywood can be when 're-imagining' non-English language works. American studios also blunder when tackling essentially British SF humour. So long in preparation that many of Douglas Adams' original jokes were overexposed to the point of becoming clichés, Garth Jennings' movie *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* (2005) mistakenly added starship romance to a range of satirical themes, perhaps not realising that geek fans probably identified with bewildered protagonist Arthur Dent because, in previous incarnations, such a nominal hero usually failed to save the world and/or win the girl.

David Twohy's overblown epic *Chronicles Of Riddick* (2004) was a mightily disappointing expansion of unpretentious monster movie *Pitch Black* (2000). Long before *Riddick*, or the updated Kelvin, confronted alien mysteries on distant worlds, 'sci-fi legend' Jack O'Neill (insufferably bland Richard Dean Anderson) had, for a decade, led the way to the stars via the miracle of teleportation, instead of all that mucking about in spaceships. Back in 1997, *Stargate SG-1*, didn't so much pick up from where Roland Emmerich's 1994 movie left off, it carried on regardless where the movie had wisely given up. Spin-off series *Stargate: Atlantis* has continued the monotony since 2004, and there's more to come when time-travelling *Stargate*:



Battlestar Galactica: Razor

*Continuum* (due July 2008) winds the clock back, right to the start. Although Gene Roddenberry has been safely dead for years, TV producers exploited his profound credibility as genre TV maven to launch *Earth: Final Conflict* (1997-2002), essentially a vapid replay of Kenneth Johnson's cult TV series *V* (1984-5) but with androgynous alien visitors; and then added insult to injury with far-future actioner *Andromeda* (2000-5), a show composed of almost limitless (socio-political, cultural, and technological) preposterousness as sci-fi, with a regular cast that were so teeth-grindingly awful (Kevin Sorbo's fans are called 'tree-huggers') that pathetic frequent-flyers on *Farscape* (read as: 'farce ape') would often seem like a cool Shakespearean acting masterclass in comparison.

The best 'SF' usually concerns revolutionary ideas bringing permanent social change. Typically, 'sci-fi' is concerned only with confronting mystery or solving any problems arising from change, and then heroically/successfully re-establishing the status quo. Despite critics' preference to read big political and theological allegories into Ronald Moore's remake of Glen Larson's *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-9), the new **BSG** tends to wallow in soapy subplots, much to the detriment of its earnestly sci-fi, interstellar refugees scenario. Admittedly, Moore's *BSG* started well. It cloned enough junk DNA from the original to catch the interest of those with fond memories of Larson's pulp-derivative nonsense. However, the dramatic impact



of the pilot movie and follow-up first season's varied surprises tailed off rapidly in subsequent seasons, leaving bitter aftertastes of science fictional absurdities and narrative incoherence. In TV-land, the remarkable often becomes rotten after one year. Repetitive melodramatics very soon become wearying, and some very fine performers – especially Edward James Olmos' admiral, and Mary McDonnell's president (also, Michelle Forbes is always watchable, Richard Hatch's opportunist rebel is great fun, and let's not forget James Callis as the amusingly scatterbrained Baltar), cannot save it. Because it requires foreknowledge of the on-going *BSG* series and its quest-for-Earth scenario, spin-off movie **Razor** is not an authentic piece of standalone drama (thirty years ago, the same was true of *Mission Galactica: The Cylon Attack*, also released on DVD). Now, as then, viewers can follow the basic storyline but would fail to notice many items of significance unless already well versed in the revised commercial sci-fi lore of this partially redundant TV show. Is *BSG* radically updated space opera or shameless pulp homage?

**Babylon 5: The Lost Tales** revisits everyone's favourite space station for yet more peacekeeping intrigues, and unabashed quasi-mystical bullshit. Despite some telling moments of strong characterisation (from Tracy Scoggins as Colonel Lockley; Bruce Boxleitner's President Sheridan) this is a desultory revival attempt that's riding home on nostalgic liking for the 1994–8 series, before the dreary *Crusade* (1999) rubbished most fans' stubborn appreciation of J. Michael Straczynski's earlier SF achievement. Perhaps they should have changed this galactic outpost into an interspecies hospital (citing James White's popular *Sector General* books?), instead of exploring political conspiracies and failing military treaties or much busyness with religious campaigns. Weird medical drama could have thrown up a few genuinely interesting SF puzzlers. Instead of eclecticism and fresh ideas, all we draw from *B5* now is a meandering plot, and once-likeable characters in directionless continuity beyond their use-by dates.

#### Babylon 5: The Lost Tales

Though it borrows from *Aliens* (1986), *Doom* (2005) hardly fits the basic criteria for a space opera. It's more in keeping with the shoot 'em up sci-fi and slasher horror-show antics previously enjoyed, to varying degrees, in *Alien Vs. Predator* (2004), futuristic horror farce *Jason X* (2002), and John Carpenter's gruesome *Ghosts Of Mars* (2001). Phil Tippett's sequel, *Starship Troopers 2: Hero Of The Federation* (2004), in which a besieged outpost is kept waiting too long for reinforcements, is not a patch on Paul Verhoeven's 1997 movie of Robert Heinlein's fascistic novel. Darren Aronofsky's epic about immortality, *The Fountain* (2006), is weighed down by its pretensions and not helped by a blathering performance from Hugh Jackman (fast becoming the kiss of death to genre cinema?), to attain the escape velocity required for consideration as proper space opera. This is a muddled fantasy from a highly acclaimed director, and not even the breathtaking presence of Rachel Weisz can save it. Could you believe its sappy Adam and Eve metaphor?

#### SPACIOUS OR MERELY SPACED?

Clint Eastwood's effects-burdened *Space Cowboys* (2000) trades up-on interest in the romanticised heroism of Philip Kaufman's classic drama *The Right Stuff* (1984), and Ron Howard's compelling *Apollo 13* (1995). TV movie *Challenger* (1990) was another curiously upbeat docudrama in similar vein, focused on media coverage and technical problems that resulted in January 1986's shuttle disaster which has impeded NASA's progress in particular, and international space programmes in general, until recently. *The Astronaut Farmer* (2006) struggled to perpetuate libertarian myths of American competency and pioneering human spirit. In the end, we don't care whether Billy Bob Thornton's DIY spaceman achieves his rocket scientist aims, and blasts off the planet, or not. Wouldn't a movie about building a space elevator have been more intriguing?

Joe Ahearne's ambitious *Space Odyssey: Voyage To The Planets* (2004) was a BBC pseudo-documentary celebrating the manned exploration of neighbouring worlds. It prompted a couple of unmanned exploratory 3D animated dioramas: Channel Four's *Alien*





*Worlds* and Discovery's *Alien Planet* (both 2005). Danny Boyle's appealing *Sunshine* (2007) combined *Dark Star* (1974) with *Thunderbirds* episode *Sun Probe* (1965). Comparatively, *Sunshine* reflects a somewhat gritty, essentially realistic, view of space travel – like those memorably depicted in Peter Hyams' *Outland* (1981), and *2010* (1984); a cycle of near-future interplanetary space opera belatedly followed by Brian De Palma's *Mission To Mars* and Antony Hoffman's *Red Planet* (both 2000). Yet, while earlier space age flicks depicted space pioneers as competent professionals, the 'Icarus II' crew of *Sunshine* revert to unsociable/outsider stereotypes, especially in the rampaging psycho climax, and the result is deeply flawed and wholly imitative, but certainly an improvement upon the likes of Walter Hill's abandoned *Supernova* (2000). However, a few half-decent recent space movies films are out there. *The Cold Equations* (2003) is a worthwhile adaptation of Tom Godwin's 1954 classic, and Robi Michael's short, *A Can Of Paint* (2004), based on A.E. van Vogt's 1944 story, is a fine updating of pulp SF traditions.

Andrew Bellware's cheesy *Millennium Crisis* (2007) is partly inspired by *The Fifth Element* (1997) but, lacking a sufficient budget for depicting its galactic warfare plot, the film evinces a camp skiffy affect akin to the pragmatic anything-goes weirdness of *Lexx* (1997–2002). It is a delirious throwback to memorably suspect productions like *Galaxina* (1980), or *Starcrash* (1978), and its unofficial sequel, *Escape From Galaxy 3* (1981). Spandex costumes and nylon wigs, a topless swordfighter, charming 1970s' styled special effects, and Ted Raimi wearing a bowtie are welcome distractions from yawning, sucking, pit-of-gloom explicatory dialogue which constitutes a plot delivery mechanism. Never mind the fate of the universe, admire the curtained set décor, and chuckle at the abrupt scene changes that should at least prevent you from dozing off.

On DVD now uncut, *Howard The Duck* (1986) introduced cinemagoers to Marvel comics' bizarre visitor from a parallel universe who's mysteriously stranded on Earth, in Cleveland. It's not strictly a space opera, but could fit into the adjacent subgenre or alien-flipside sub-set of 'planetary romance', much like Nicolas Roeg's *Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), John Carpenter's *Starman*, and John Sayles' *Brother From Another Planet* (both 1984), or – and perhaps it's a more accurate comparison? – Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982). A unique blockbuster fantasy about Steve Gerber's cigar-chomping beer-guzzling alien with a sarcastic attitude, Willard Huyck's movie was a memorable box-office failure, but has since acquired a strong cult following. (Pledge allegiance to your new feathered-friend now!) Prudes may have balked at the latent bestiality (does our heroine really fuck a fowl?), while arty purists discriminated against gross absurdity masquerading as surrealism but, in its own way, this offbeat 'first contact' adventure belongs in the same myth-riddled category as *Superman* (1978). No, only joking! It's not only Hollywood that's reviving 'awkward' movies for home entertainment discs. Japan has a vast back catalogue of both animated and live-action pictures. Despite its irritating product placements, a turgidly-paced didactic narrative (about discovering a runaway black hole threatening the Solar system, and a human science-hero effort to destroy Jupiter), and terribly wooden actors (not helped by truly dreadful English dubbing) all delivering gravely hackneyed dialogue, writer-director Sakyo Komatsu's keenly dialectic sci-fi spectacular *Sayonara Jupiter* (1984) appears just the sort of vaguely serious genre movie that Gerry Anderson might well have championed, in the wake of *Journey To The Far Side Of The Sun* (aka: *Doppelgänger*, 1969), if he'd been able to avoid simply producing more telly stuff. Interestingly, the giant planet's fate in Komatsu's film mirrors a similar 'catastrophe' in *2010*, and Komatsu's book appeared in 1982,

same year as Clarke's novel *Odyssey Two*. With the Japanese film tarred and feathered with its 22nd century's hippie sentimentality, there's clearly no accounting for disparate cultural tastes.

Now, **Family Guy: Blue Harvest** spoofs *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Are the makers of this TV programme daring and brilliant? No. Tiresomely unimaginative and crude farce is quite passé. Mel Brooks' *Spaceballs* (1987) had a better assortment of jokes! When a budget-free digest of the whole *Star Wars* movies saga that was performed on stage at 2005's Worldcon boasted more entertainingly throwaway sketches than this, well...there's really no point in offering any constructive criticism. This is not a proper animated sci-fi comedy; it is simply another depressingly cheap and cheerless cartoon rip-off of a 30-year-old film. Several snidely non-PC gags at the expense of gays, disabled people, and ethnic minorities are particularly tired, and/or deplorably condescending, and so it delivers no legitimate fun whatsoever. Like their version of Chewbacca, it's a dog.

Contrary to all of the above, I do believe that bad SF is certainly healthier than none. But, if the crux of space opera concerns escapism (from gravity, in every meaning of the word), such movies and TV series need to look ahead, not backward. The very last thing we need today is another reversionary plod through *Star Trek* lore, or the Sci-Fi Channel insolently re-doing *Flash Gordon*. Where are the screen adaptations of Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, or Bob Shaw's *Orbitsville*? What about David Brin's great *Uplift* series, C.J. Cherryh's shelf-load of 'Union-Alliance' titles, and Vernor Vinge's superb *A Fire Upon The Deep*? (To mention just a handful of un-filmed favourites.) With the current vogue for CGI enabling anything 'imaginable' to be presented realistically on screen, why does the movie industry continue to neglect the tantalising possibilities for some ultimate-fun space opera based on Iain M. Banks' *Culture* novels? **Tony Lee**

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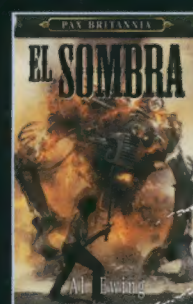
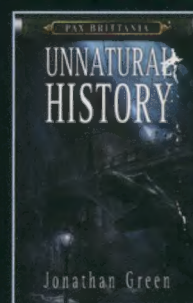
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